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とある科学の超電磁砲

レールガン

Novel Illustrations

アニメ『とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）』
第①巻初回特典付録

とある科学の超電磁砲（レールガン）

第一話

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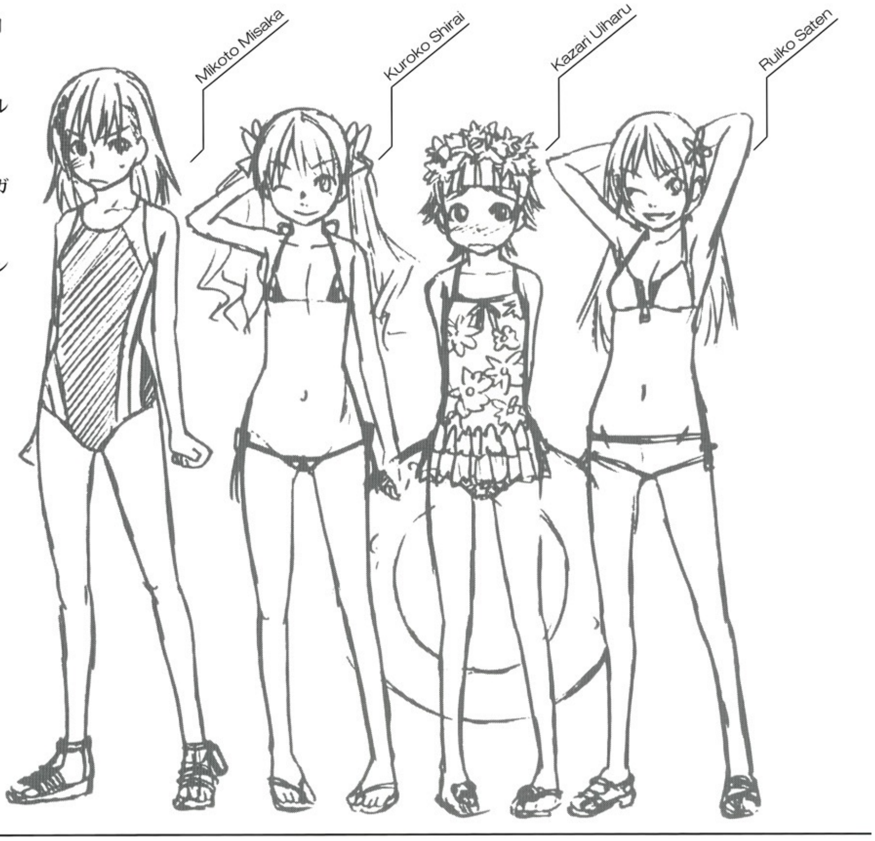
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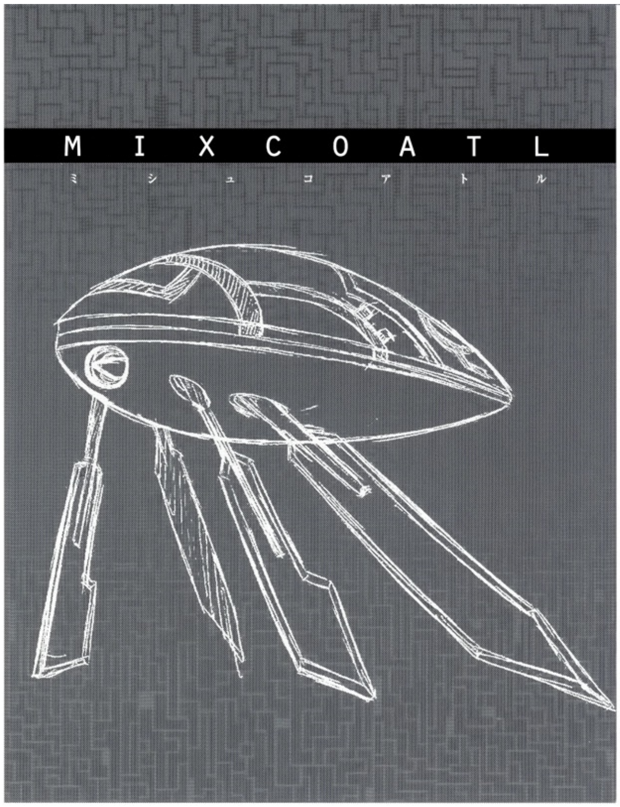

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第二話

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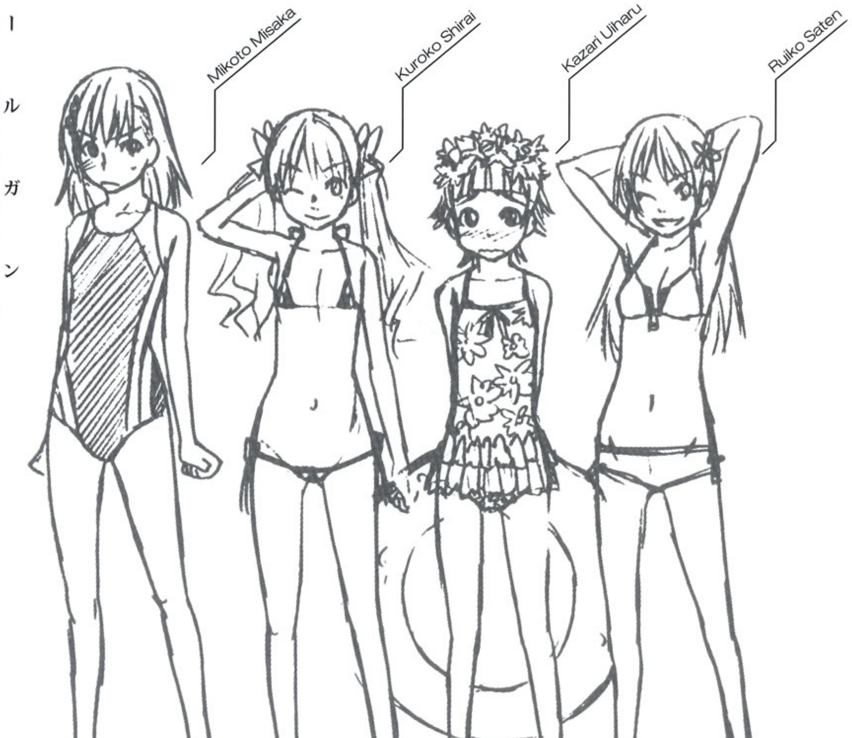
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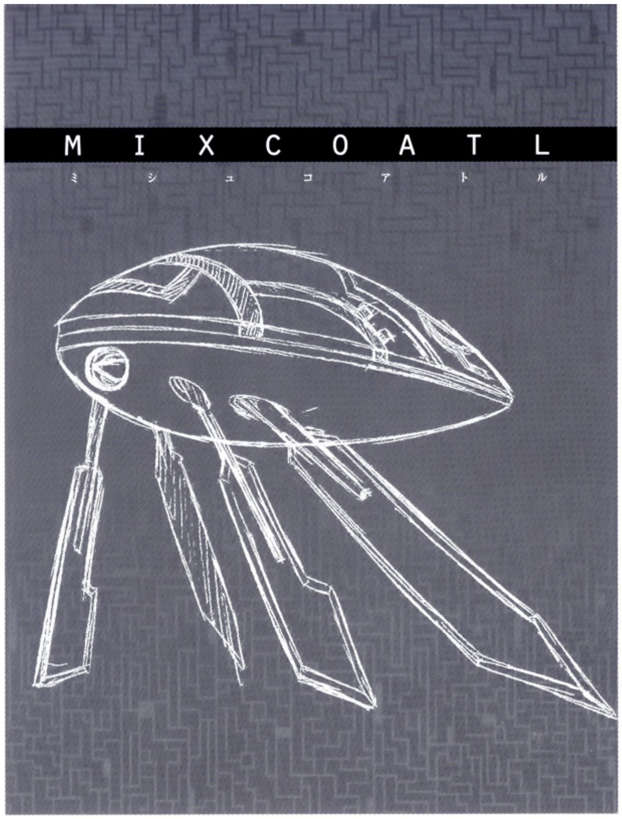

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キャラクターデザイン／灰村キヨタカ
装丁・デザイン／根津典彦（G-SQUARE）
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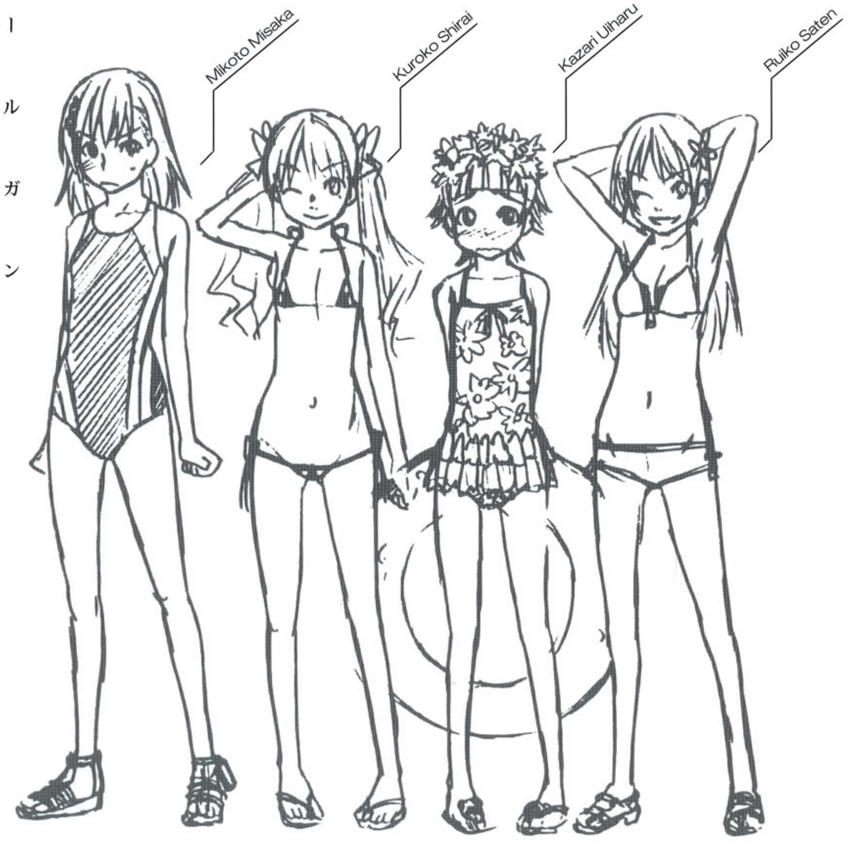
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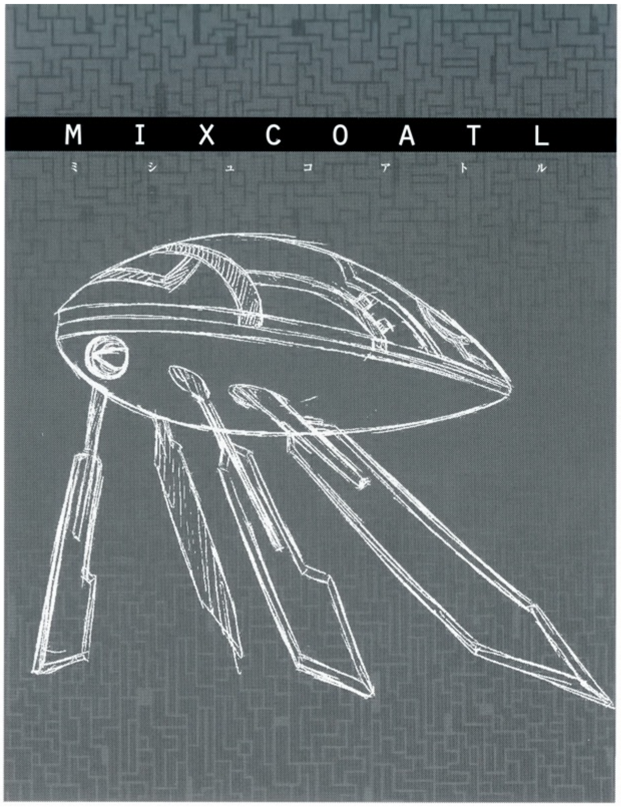

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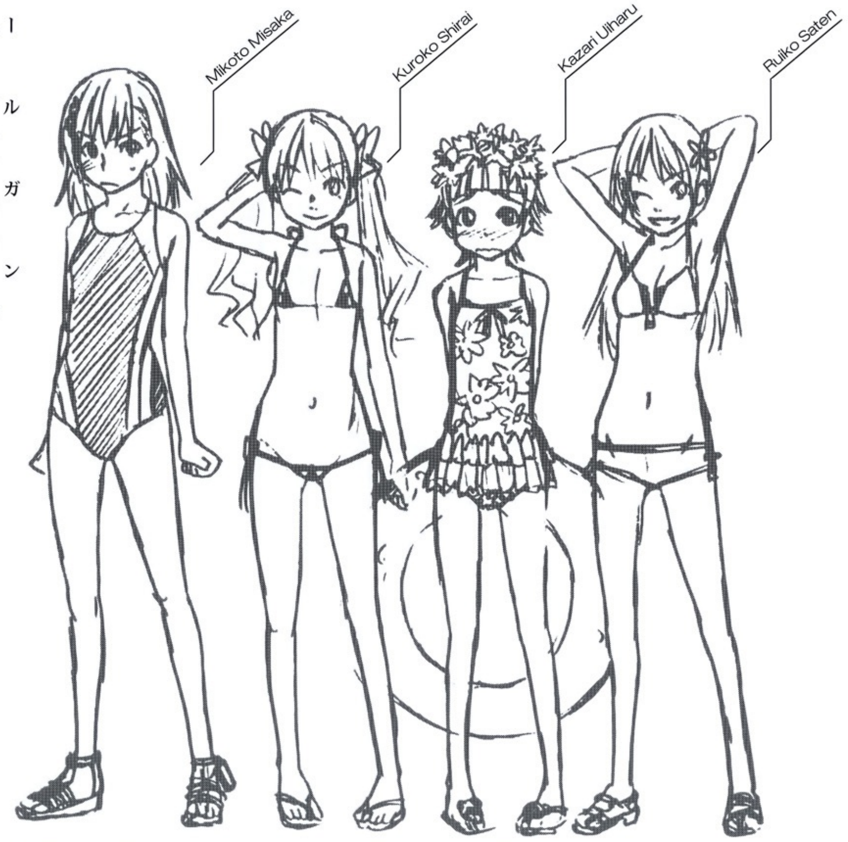
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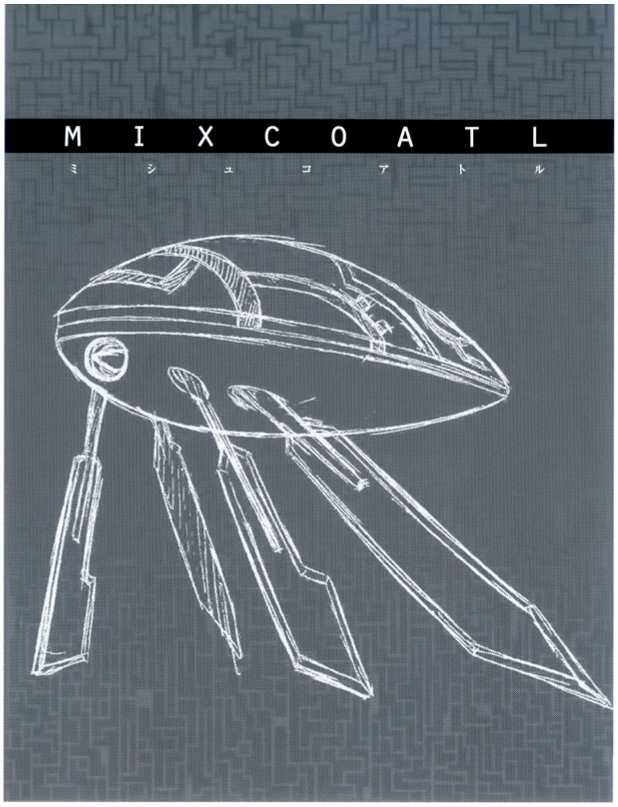

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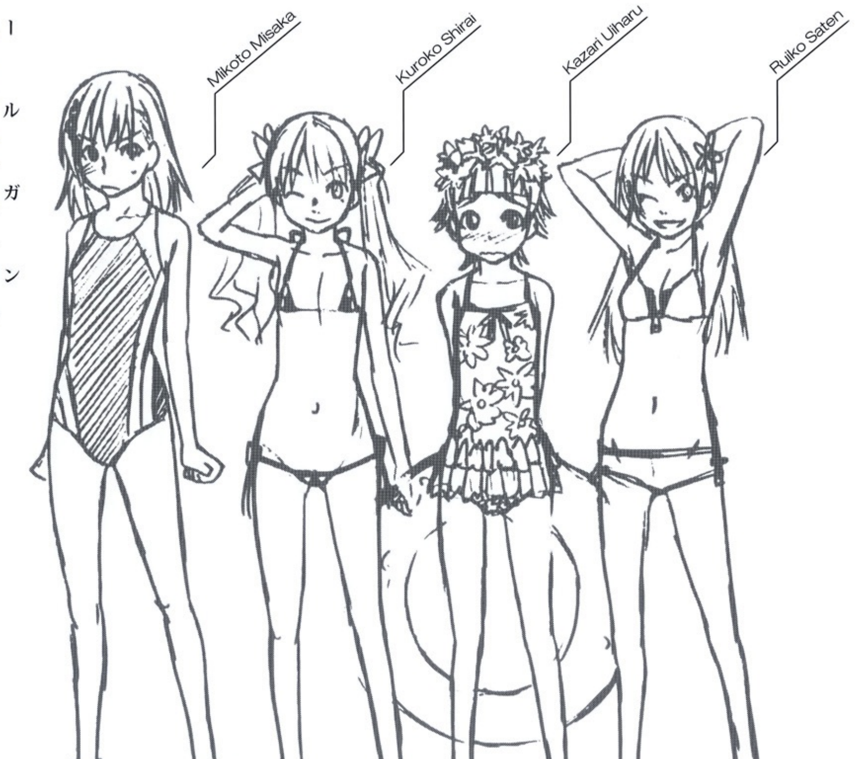
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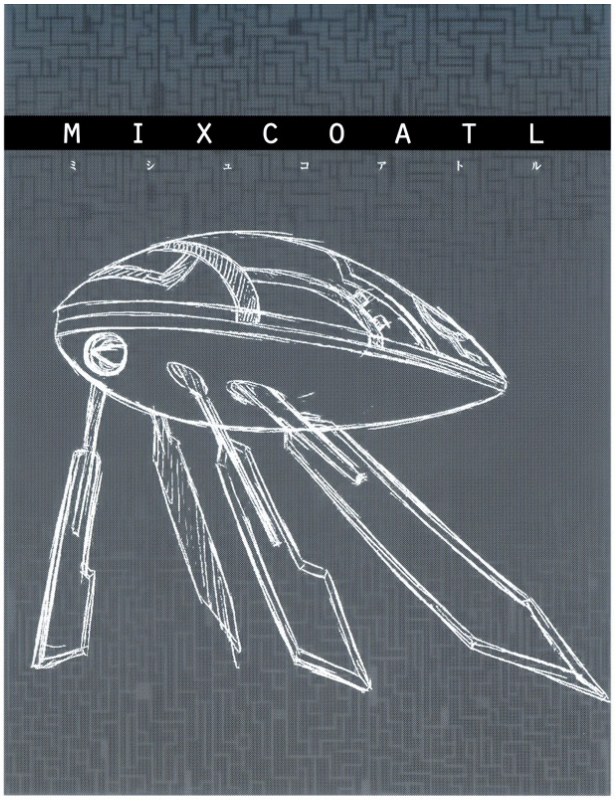

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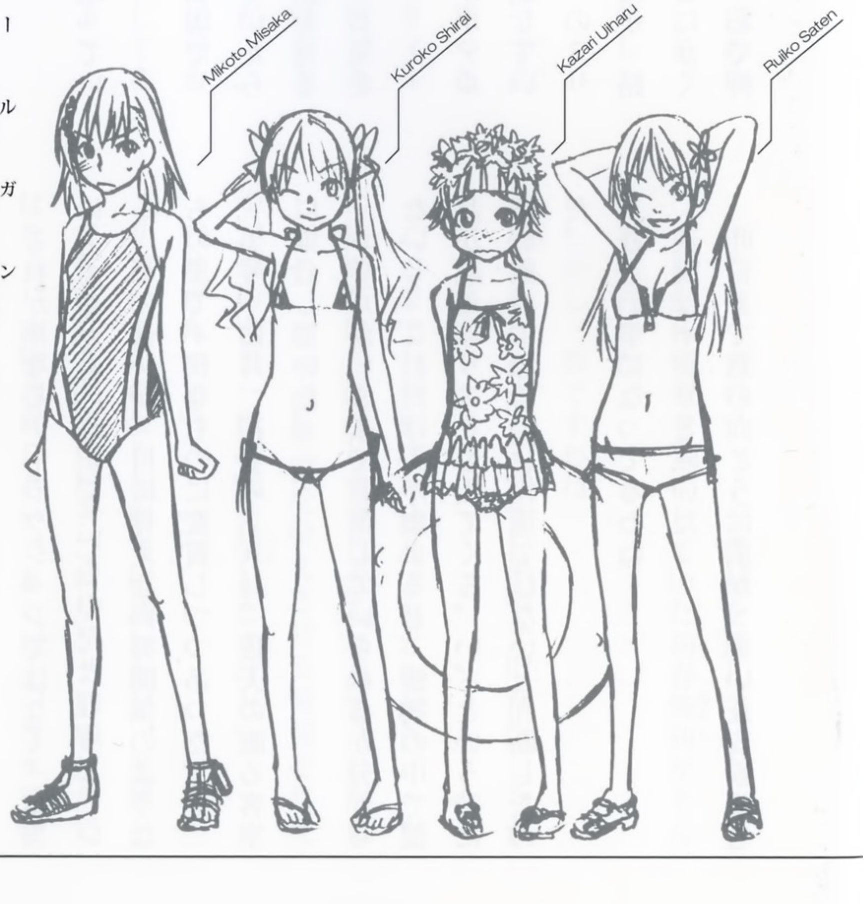
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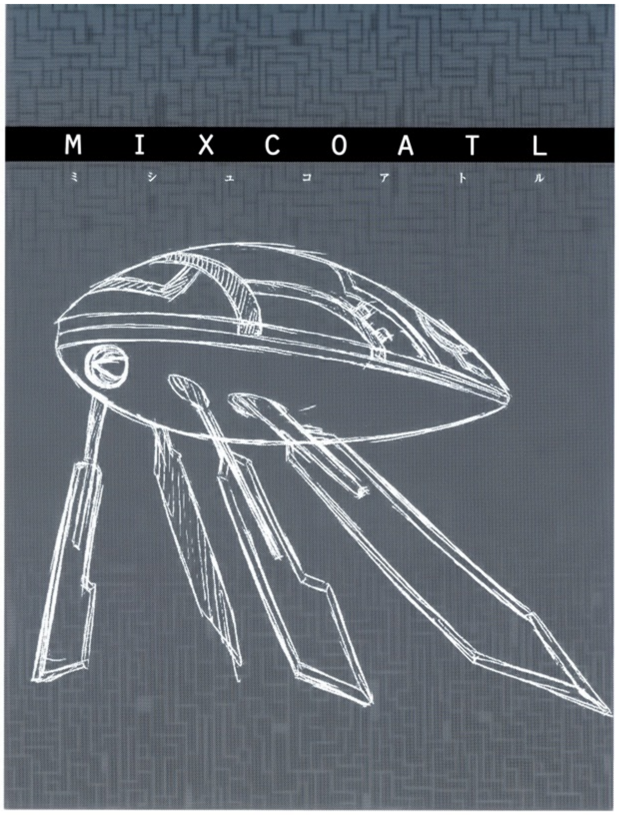

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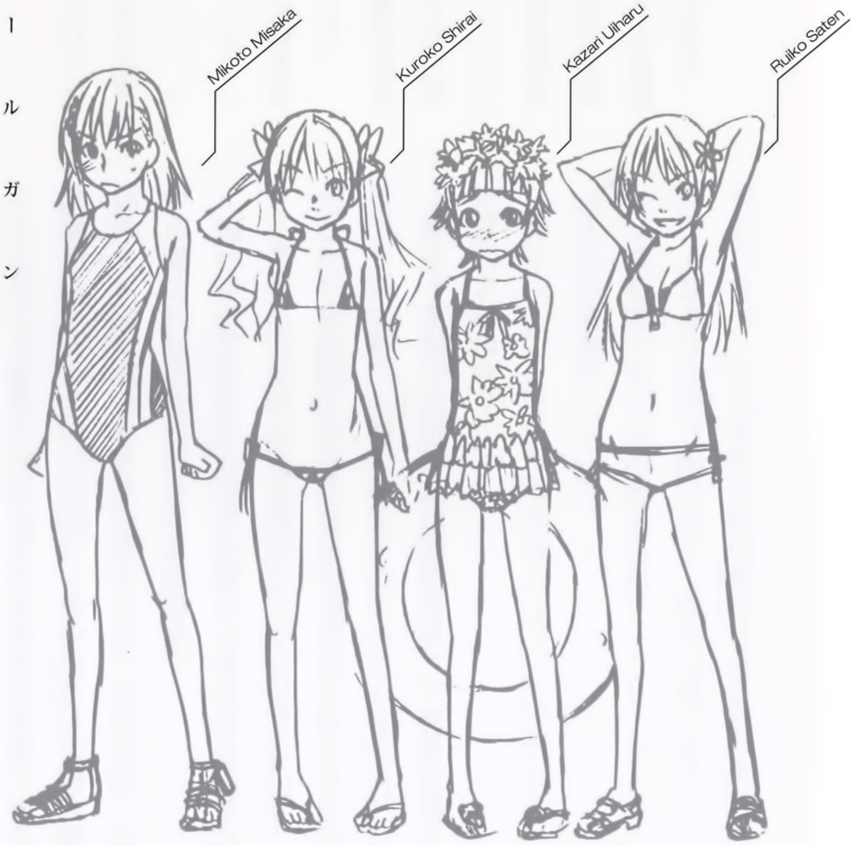
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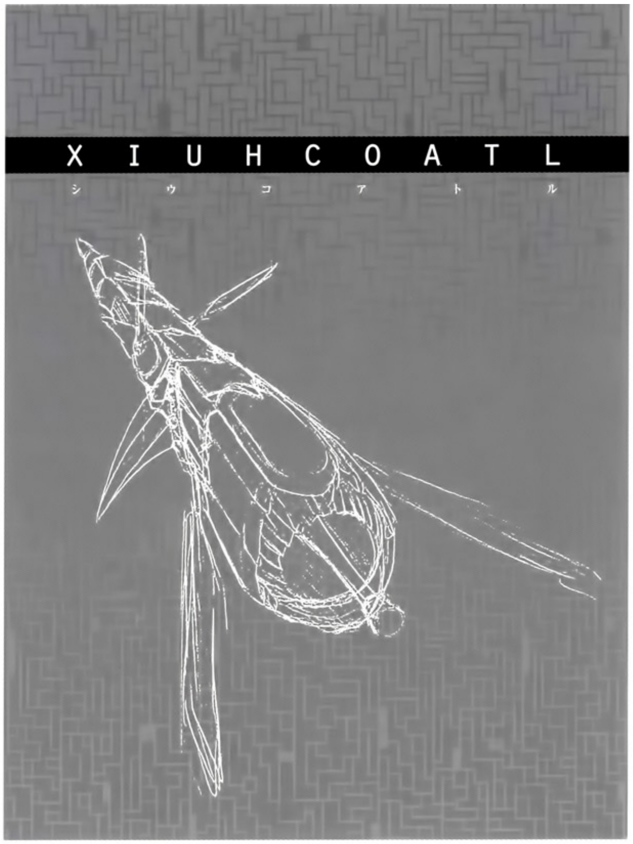

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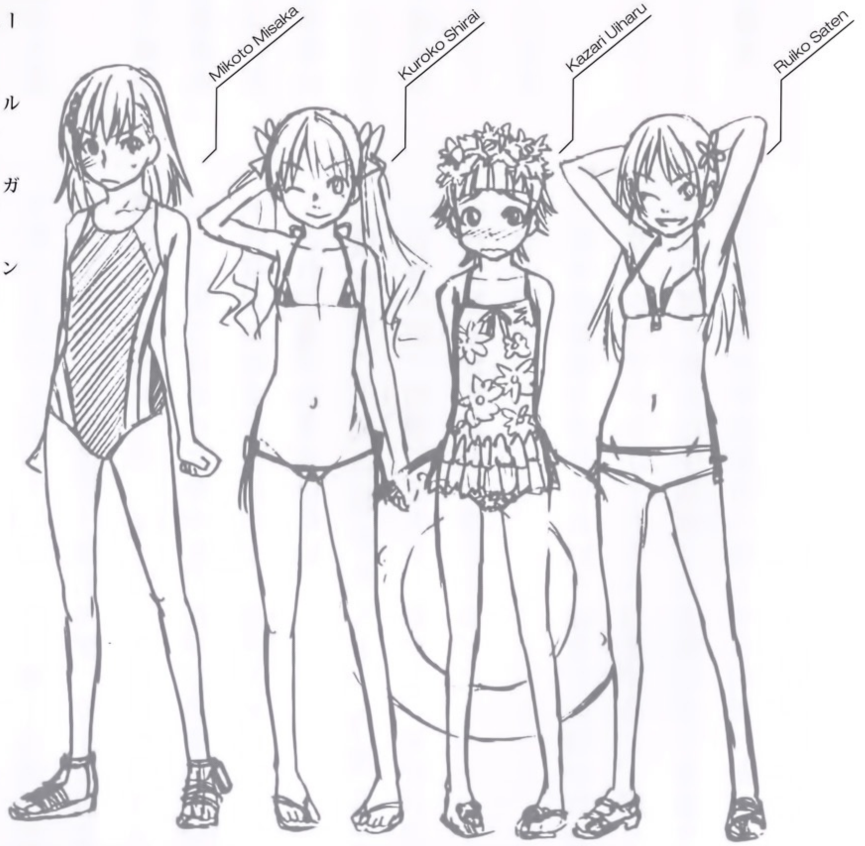
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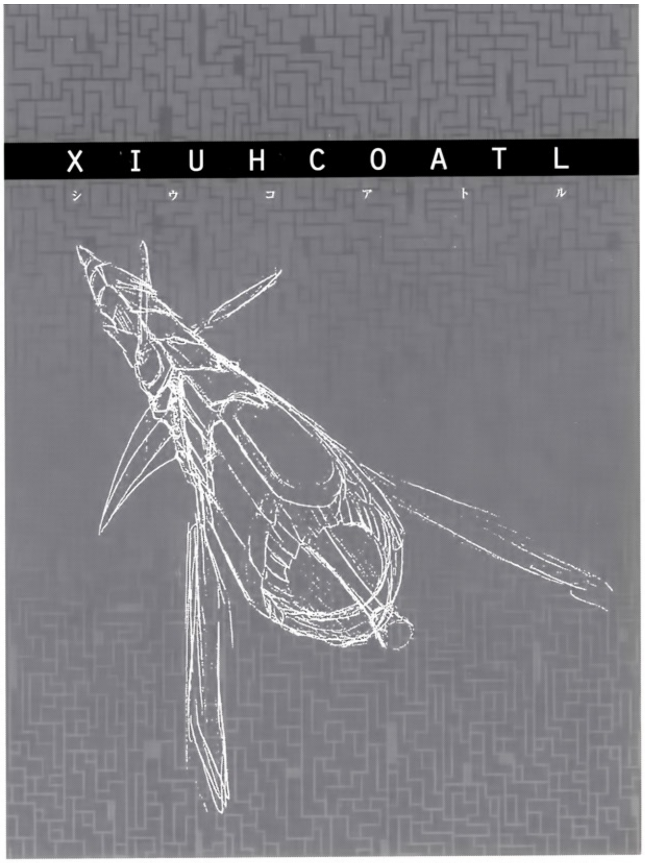

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Chapter 1

It was a refreshing summer day.

It may have been wrong to express it in such a simple and abstract way, but that was the first thing that came to mind when Misaka Mikoto looked up at the blue sky. She felt the intense rays of the sun roasting her skin, the low-humidity wind blowing at her face, and the soft sand under her feet through her sandals. The wind brought her the sound of crashing waves and the smell of salt.

She was on a beach.

She was on a California beach.

Nnn… After the plane, the linear motor train, and all the other things I rode on, this sure does feel liberating.

Mikoto lifted her arms up to stretch her back. She was wearing a black racing swimsuit with curving white lines on it. The swimsuit gave a killer whale-like impression. The back of the swimsuit was open, and it was held in place by an "H"-shaped band. It was the designated swimsuit for Tokiwadai Middle School’s power measurement tests. The swimsuit had so much cutting-edge technology packed into it that even an Olympic swimmer would be envious, but Mikoto did not particularly like it. It was so effective that she sometimes felt like she wasn't wearing anything at all.

Ahh, dammit. I brought it because this is a school-related event. I didn’t know you were free to choose your swimsuit! I should have actually read the pamphlet…

Then the lack of feeling made her suddenly wonder if she was wearing it at all, and she shuddered in the same way she had countless times that day. She pulled on the chest portion of the suit and felt along the butt portion of the suit to assure herself that she really was wearing a swimsuit and not just body paint.

And then…

“M-Misaka-saaan…” came a small and pitiable voice from a bit of a distance away.

Mikoto looked over and saw Uiharu Kazari running her way. Her sandals that seemed to be made of cork slapped against the sand as she ran. The girl had a large number of flower decorations on her head. As if the flowers were part of her identity, her swimsuit was a light-pink one-piece with a flower print. It was a perfectly wholesome swimsuit.

The swimsuit was not very revealing, but Uiharu must not have liked it much, because her face was completely red, she had tears welling up in her eyes, and she was covering her upper body with her hands. It was possible that she just wasn’t used to being in an area with lots of foreigners.

While focusing on her surroundings, Uiharu spoke,

“Sigh… Misaka-san, I’m jealous of how sharp your swimsuit is. Mine is just so unfashionable or makeshift or something…”

“No, I wouldn’t say that.”

Mikoto was in a bad mood herself for having sabotaged herself by wearing a school-designated swimsuit. Uiharu didn’t seem to notice and looked down at the chest of her own swimsuit.

“I never thought I would be chosen in the lottery for this. I had no time or budget to choose a swimsuit, so this was really the only thing left at the store…”

The two of them sighed.

A new challenger then barged in on them. She was Saten Ruiko, Uiharu Kazari’s classmate. She was a lively girl with black hair that went just past her shoulders and that had a single flower decoration in it. She tended to be influenced by the Level 5 Misaka Mikoto and the Level 4 Shirai Kuroko, but…

“Yahoo, Misaka-saaan, Uiharu!! Were you waiting?”

“!?”

“!?”

Heading toward them with a smile and waving a hand was a girl who had escaped being plain. Saten’s moderate body was wrapped in a red triangle bikini and she looked like a girl who would fully enjoy summer to the two who disliked their own swimsuits. And she must have bought it at a fairly exquisite store because the chest of the bikini was fastened like it was a front hook but with a zipper instead.

Uiharu started trembling as she focused on her chest.

“Wh-what is that, Saten-san? What kind of mysterious item is that…?”

“Hm? You need to do some studying, Uiharu-kun. It’s called a zip-up bikini. Look, look. When I move around, it almost looks like the chest is going to pop open. Doesn’t that have a nice dangerous feel to it?”

“Gyaah!! J-just by looking at that as a girl, it scares me, Saten-san!!”

“Don’t worry. It’s actually like a NuBra. The entire top sticks to my chest, so nothing’s gonna pop out just because the zipper is undone.”

As she watched the Uiharu and Saten combo get all worked up, Misaka Mikoto got a serious look in her eyes as she thought silently.

She didn’t try to trick anyone about her bust size, but she managed to increase her impression as a breasts character by bringing focus on the possibility of them coming out of the swimsuit… I see. So you can fight that way, too!!

Saten noticed Mikoto staring at her and looked at her in puzzlement.

“Umm, is something wrong, Misaka-san?”

“Afh!? N-nothing at all!!”

Mikoto frantically shook her head.

Saten looked puzzled, but she didn’t press any further. She then glanced over at Uiharu’s swimsuit.

“Hey, Uiharu. Are you trying to be a loli character so you can prey on older men?”

“Abhah?! Wh-what are you saying, Saten-san!? That’s the worst possible opinion of my swimsuit I can think of!!”

“But your light-peach flower-print one-piece clearly gives you the image of a cute girl. And not a cute girl from another girl’s perspective. This is the kind of cute girl a muscular festival of sweat and tears would imagine in his head.”

“I had no choice!! I actually wanted to wear a nice sharp swimsuit!! But this was the only thing left in the sale corner!! Gyaahh!!”

Uiharu gave out a cry of embarrassment, Saten pointed at her and laughed, and Mikoto realized that her sense of style was off from the norm because she had just been thinking that a flower-print one-piece would be nice and cute.

And then Mikoto realized something.

“Huh? Where’s Kuroko?”

“I met her at the hotel, but she told me to go ahead because she was going to take a while,” responded Uiharu.

Mikoto frowned.

“What is she doing that’s going to take a while? She isn’t going to put on makeup in order to play on the beach, is she?”

“She might be the kind of person that worries about her tan. She might have wanted to put oil all over herself before coming outside,” said Saten, giving an offhand guess.

Suddenly, a strange chill ran down all three of their backs.

There was some kind of commotion in the distance. Something was approaching, dragging the sound of chattering voices with it. A sweat drop dripped from Mikoto’s forehead, past her nose, and off her chin. Uiharu’s eyes restlessly darted back and forth. All of the hair on Saten’s body stood on end.

Something was coming.

A monster was approaching.

At that time, those pure maidens had a few different options: they could pretend to be strangers, run away at Mach speed, or rush into the ocean. However, they had no time. Before they could choose any of those things, the approaching calamity turned its eyes in their direction.

Standing there was a completely flesh-colored girl who was wearing an unexplainable self-imposed restraint.

“Byaaahhh!?”

The high-pitched scream must have come from Uiharu. Saten was wearing the already revealing zip-up bikini, but she wobbled as if suffering from heatstroke. For some reason, Mikoto’s vision blurred as if she were chopping onions. She heard various voices in English around her.

“Wh-what the hell!?”

“Can you do that…? Can humanity really accept that!?”

“So that’s what a Japanese samurai is…”

Normally, sweaty men would try to figure out how to curry the favor of a girl in a highly revealing swimsuit, but the crowd was in a very odd mood because that swimsuit was past the level of being sexy.

The pigtailed girl who was throwing people’s minds into disorder was named Shirai Kuroko. The smile on her face alone was innocent-looking as she locked on to Mikoto.

“Onee-samaaa. I’m so very sorry. It took some time to get ready. Heh heh. I couldn’t let myself look bad before you, onee-sama.”

“S-stop!! Don’t talk like I like this!! We’re in a foreign country! What are you doing!? I’ve thought it before, but now I’m sure. You’re completely insane!!”

“Oh, dear. Is covering the three important points of the body not enough for a swimsuit?”

“That certainly does just barely cover up those points…” Uiharu muttered with a look of despair on her face.

Shirai truly must not have minded because her expression did not change. Her truly evil swimsuit was made up of strings and small points of cloth that seemed to construct just the basic “framework” of a bikini. The top had strings arranged in triangles with Y-shaped strings stretching from them splitting the inside of the triangles into three zones. Only the inner zone close to her “cleavage” had a piece of cloth stuck on it. The bottom was just a triangular point of cloth inside one of those triangular “frameworks” with thin strings connecting them.

Decorative strings pushed out the slight bit of white flesh at her chest to give the feeling that she was bound by ropes in order to give extra-special nosebleeds. The swimsuit seemed more like something someone would be forced to wear by someone else than something one would wear of their own free will.

But… what is it like on the back?

Saten Ruiko circled around Shirai like someone looking at something that terrified them.

“Uuh!? Cough cough cough!!”

“A-are you okay, Saten-san! Saten-san!!”

“D-don’t look, Uiharu… The back is quite something, too!! While her ass is not completely lifted up, it has much more of an impact than a T-back that just digs in at one point!!”

“Nnn. It’s just a variety of bikini. Really, swimsuits are all either one-pieces or two-pieces. Even with a slingshot, if you observe it calmly, it’s nothing too surprising. There are also types where the material is put directly on the skin, so I feel that it’s about time we started a revolution.”

“…You aren’t about to begin using body paint, are you?” Mikoto asked with a disheartened expression.

That swimsuit was probably made to not come off easily similarly to Saten’s zip-up bikini, but it was already too much whether any more came off or not.

Then, Uiharu Kazari began speaking while blushing, having just barely managed to recover.

“W-well, arguing about it isn’t going to help anything. They say to just throw away your shame while on a vacation, right?”

“??? What shame?”

“…It’s no use, Uiharu-san. She threw all that away long ago. There’s no helping her,” said the ace of the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School in a rare complaint.

As Mikoto stood stricken on the white sand, an older blonde girl who seemed to be a part-time worker glanced over (probably at Shirai), and gave a small gasp. However, she then continued on with her job.

The girl was wearing a sun visor and a sporty bikini that made her look a bit like a beach volleyball player. She was holding a white rectangular box in her arms. At first, Mikoto thought she was selling ice cream, but that wasn’t it. The beach volleyball-like blonde girl spoke in English,

“I’ll take your handguns here. Anyone who does not want their precious partners to be ruined by the sand, seawater, and sea wind should use our services. Any handguns from the eight major companies get complimentary maintenance.”

That announcement would have left people speechless in Japan, but it seemed to be standard there. Everyone from macho black men to slender housewives handed those shining black hunks of tough metal to the girl. The girl wrapped rubber bands around the grips of the handguns, and then put them in the white box. The rubber bands had chips within them that had GPS locators and information on their owners inputted into them.

“Wow,” Saten said as she looked on in amazement.

It seemed that Shirai and Uiharu had dealt a little with guns before in their Judgment training, but they still couldn’t hide their surprise. Mikoto sighed.

“…We really are in America, aren’t we?”

It all started with a large-scale field trip.

A randomly selected group of students from Japan’s Academy City went to places all over the world over the week of September 3 to 10 in what was essentially a study group. Groups of about twenty people would head to a single city. Meanwhile, children from all over the world were invited to Academy City.

While it was referred to as “all over the world”, most of the places were cities across America. This was likely because of their cooperative relationship when Academy City was founded. It was clear that more students ended up going to America than any other country.

“I’m really glad some people I know like you are with me, Saten-san, Misaka-san.”

“Well, more people were sent here than most other places. Then again, where we go and what group we’re in are supposed to be random, so we were lucky.”

In the end, it was essentially a field trip. Other than writing a simple report, all they had to do was have fun, so it was practically a paradise for a student.

Other students and a few teachers from Japan were there with Mikoto and the other three, but they weren’t really sure where those others were because they were all more or less free to do what they wanted. The only structured thing was a roll-call in the hotel at the beginning and end of each day.

When they had first gathered at the Liberal Arts City hotel, Mikoto had seen a Psychometry girl wearing a bikini with ring-shaped parts in place of knots, an Aero Hand girl wearing a one-piece swimsuit with the back open wide, and a few others, but she no longer knew where they were. That was just how free they were to do what they wanted on that trip.

“America sure does do things on a large scale,” said Saten Ruiko as she looked around the beach. “I can’t believe all this was artificially created to film a single Hollywood movie. That would be unthinkable in Academy City. Well, we have the tech to do it, but we just don’t have enough land.”

They were on a gigantic manmade island with a diameter of about ten kilometers created on the ocean about fifty kilometers off the coast of California. The ocean in that general area had a depth of a few thousand meters, but apparently, rocky areas had gradually risen up, giving that specific area a depth of about twenty meters. Manmade items had been piled up on top of that with a huge amount of sand at the very top in order to create the manmade island.

I've heard of manmade beaches around Hawaii, but the scale here is way bigger…

The artificially created island was divided into a few different areas. Mikoto, Saten, and the others were in the outermost area. Beyond the sandy beach was a shallow area of ocean, with the open ocean of the Pacific beyond that.

The name of the island was Liberal Arts City.

Appropriate for a large country of amusement and movies, the entire area was filled with attractions. Many different roller coasters intertwined through the air, and the rings of weird Ferris wheels with no center overlapped like the Olympic rings. It was a theme park where everything from the exteriors of the hotels to the shape of the trash cans had been cutely designed. The island was designed to be a fusion of the sea and fun, so everything aside from sleeping in your hotel bed was made to be done in your swimsuits.

“So this was a movie set, hm? Saten-san, did you see that one?”

“Hmm. Unfortunately, it was released over twenty years ago, and apparently, a lot happened, so it was never released in Japan.” Saten laughed. “I think it was an SF movie. It was supposed to be on Earth in the near future, so they faked an environment made up of plants and animals from fifty years in the future. Apparently, there's even a fine mesh around Liberal Arts City called a biological guard that keeps living things from getting in or out.”

“Hmm.” Mikoto looked over at the horizon on the ocean. “So that's why it's connected to the rest of America by an undersea linear motor train tunnel. They want to keep the scenery as uniform as possible.”

“They didn't have that linear technology at the time of filming, which made things difficult. Apparently, it took over an hour each way.”

Linear motor trains may have sounded futuristic, but they were already in use in

China. They were not seen very often in Academy City because the city did not have very many long distances that required them.

To Mikoto, heading through the transparent undersea tunnel and seeing all sorts of fish had made the experience a very dynamic and interesting one.

“Anyway, once the filming was finished, people started saying that it would be a waste to just abandon it all, so they decided to remake the entire manmade island into a theme park.”

“I see. No, get away from me, you exhibitionist.”

Mikoto pushed away the girl wearing the perverted swimsuit who she wanted to pretend to not know.

Uiharu’s flower decorations swayed in the wind.

“If I remember correctly, the state’s ocean conservation regulations didn’t allow them to just abandon an unused facility, and the film company got mad, saying that the politicians didn’t understand how much it would cost to demolish such a large facility,” she said. “Some people made the ridiculous argument that they should just make sure the facility remained in use, and that just so happened to be the same time the film company was looking for some land to build a theme park on, so they just ended up solving both problems by building it here.”

It was a bit scary that such a huge theme park had ended up being created based on such a ridiculous argument. Mikoto looked up in the sky and sighed while watching a roller coaster that cut across above.

And then…

“You’ve got that wrong, you living flower girl wearing that unfashionable flower-print one-piece!!”

“Hagwah!?”

Uiharu Kazari was in shock at having some complete stranger suddenly insult her sense in swimsuits. The mysterious person who had gone out of her way to speak to them in Japanese was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, older American girl with huge breasts.

She looked to be around eighteen years old. She had white skin, blue eyes, and long blonde hair with a bit of caramel mixed in that was roughly lifted up in a hairband. She wore a highly functional-looking two-piece swimsuit and a T-shirt with a film company’s logo on it. The shirt was bulging out quite a bit because…

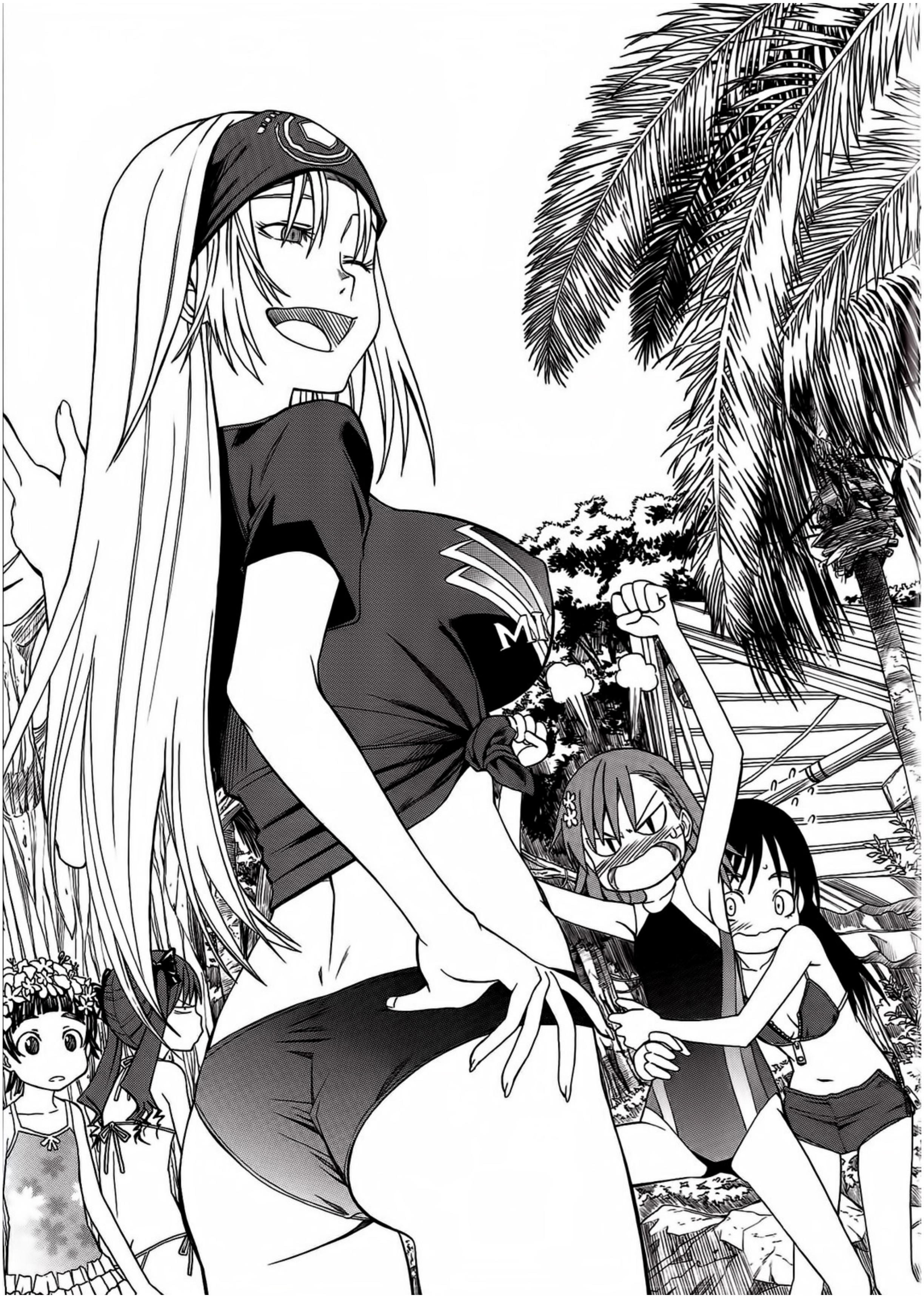
“Th-they’re huge!?!?!? Those are stupidly big. They’re just way too big! I mean, what the hell!?”

“M-Misaka-san, it’s okay! Those boobs aren’t eating anyone or anything!!” Saten grabbed Mikoto’s shoulders, gathered strength in her belly, and yelled out. “And don’t worry! I thought this might happen, so I made sure to search for rumors of the Bust Upper that can easily make a girl’s breasts grow!!”

“Oooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“W-wait, Misaka-san! You, too, Saten-san! You’ll definitely get caught up in some terrible trouble if you do that!!”

“…Um, are you even listening?”



Hearing that moderate remark, Mikoto came back to her senses.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed, huge-breasted girl worked towards regulating the tension of the atmosphere as she spoke.

“The circumstances surrounding the origin of Liberal Arts City were a bit more complicated than that. I was trying to say that I could tell you the whole story if you liked, you not-yet-grown girls!!”

The huge-breasted girl struck them right in their complex about their breasts. Mikoto’s temple throbbed, but the more pissed she got, the more pathetic she seemed because of the overwhelming difference in breast size.

“…Who are you, anyway?”

“Hah!? Don’t tell me you’re the type of person that explains all sorts of things without us asking and then demands we pay a ten-dollar fee for the explanations!!”

Saten went into full caution mode, but the huge-breasted girl just gave a proud laugh and answered,

“I wish I could just hold out a business card and say 'this is who I am', but this is the beach! I don’t have little pieces of paper like that with me!! As such, I have to introduce myself by mouth despite knowing it’s impolite. I am Beverly Seethrough. I may not look it, but I’m a film director.”

A look that said “Really…?” almost showed up on Mikoto’s face. The girl looked eighteen. If what she said was true, she wasn’t just on the level of a genius girl. Mikoto didn’t really have a good image of what a film director was, but she had a feeling that it wasn’t something one could become with just a bit of talent.

Well, who cares if it’s just a lie?

They said to just throw away your shame on a vacation. Getting fooled could be mildly entertaining as long as it didn’t involve money or their lives.

Meanwhile, the huge-breasted girl calling herself a film director grinned.

“You all are Japanese students from Academy City, right?”

“Oh, you can tell?” asked Saten with a puzzled look on her face.

Beverly nodded once and pointed at Shirai Kuroko.

“Even in America, you don’t see anything like that. Only Academy City would sell a swimsuit that evil.”

“…You’ve outdone even the land of the free.”

“Don’t think of America as number one at everything, onee-sama.”

“Don’t compete for being number one in the direction of being worst,” Mikoto sighed, but Shirai of course didn’t seem to mind. “So why is a film director like you here?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“?”

The woman suddenly puffed her chest up with pride, but Mikoto had no idea. The screams from the roller coaster rushing by overhead sounded a bit stupid.

The blond-haired, huge-breasted girl cleared her throat in response to Mikoto’s blank expression.

“You know Liberal Arts City was created by a major film company, right? Why do you think they did it? It was to search for new filming techniques. That is why all sorts of people in that line of work have been gathered here.”

Beverly lightly waved her index finger around. “Movies are about enjoyment, and they are America’s best means of acquiring foreign currency. To put it bluntly, a few percentage points of America’s budget are supported by it. It isn’t too surprising that something like this was created.”

“Wow. That’s Hollywood for you. I guess that’s how people who built a city in a desert think.”

Uiharu was simply expressing her admiration, but Beverly chuckled.

"By the way, there is a single cause for concern in America's film industry, and that is Japan's Academy City."

"?"

"The entertaining epics of this country really come down to the world of CG and VFX. Some people insist on the value of the work itself or the art involved, but in the end, a certain amount of showiness is needed to create a huge hit. So, if Academy City seriously used all of its scientific technology to create a movie, our works would seem shabby in comparison. It's like how the old cell phone models all look dated as soon as a new model is released despite the models up to then working just fine."

Beverly spun her index finger around in some sort of gesture.

Saten looked puzzled.

"Are you sure…? I decide what movies to watch by who's in them."

"Yes, and there are people who watch over that kind of thing. They use information and money to search for actors from all over the world, invite them in, and make contracts with them. And all of it is a countermeasure against Academy City."

"Wow," said Uiharu in surprise.

Shirai frowned.

"But is Academy City even trying to make movies?"

"No, but we want to have filming techniques that can outdo Academy City before they decide to and get so far ahead of us that we can't catch up. It's amazing. The film company, the film investment fund, the Senate, and the House of Representatives were all for this." Beverly, the self-proclaimed film director, laughed. "As such, I wanted to have some bit of contact with Japan's Academy City, the home of the science side. That's why I called out to you. I'm hoping that you can give me some kind of motivation. Remember that some of the things you are casually using as sightseers have great value to us."

"…Um, I don't think you're going to get anything from us. We're just normal people. We aren’t aliens or anything, so I hope you aren’t expecting some sort of exchange of technological cultures or anything,” responded Mikoto wearily.

Beverly stared blankly up and down along Shirai Kuroko’s perverted swimsuit.

“…Really?”

“Oh, sorry. Please don’t use that as your reference point.”

Despite what the self-proclaimed film director Beverly Seethrough said…

“Huh!? Where did that pair of breasts get off to!?”

“She made some kind of complaint about having to go work and then wandered off that way,” said Shirai as she looked around the area.

She might be able to find her using her teleportation, but it didn’t seem that important.

“But she said she’d show us around. Maybe she’s a workaholic,” said Uiharu.

Meanwhile, Saten muttered faintly as she watched Beverly leave.

“…Liberal Arts City sure is amazing. That’s a movie city for you…”

“Yeah, but was she really a director?”

Mikoto was beginning to think she had just been a theme park official or a part time performer. It could have been an attraction meant to give the park more of the sense of being a movie city.

But Saten then spoke in puzzlement.

“Eh? That was the real Beverly Seethrough. I’ve seen her picture in movie magazines before. She’s the genius new director who received high praise last year at Cannes. It was big news that an underage girl managed to outdo the veterans she was up against.”

Misaka Mikoto did a spit take.

“Wha—Wai—Dahhh!! You mean she’s the one that made “An Iron Bridge is a Sign of Love”!? If so…gmaaaaahhhh!! I need her autograph!!”

Mikoto yelled, but the huge-breasted girl had already disappeared into the crowd. Mikoto’s miserable cries resounded throughout the area.

“People were treating her like she was the next big thing in European romance films, but I guess she ended up coming here. They must be trying to make a really showy film.”

“…Y-you sure are calm, Saten-san.”

“Hm? Her movie was pretty, but it was too difficult for a kid like me to understand. I take it you’re the type that goes for that kind of subjective romance film, Misaka-san.”

“N-n-n-not really. It isn’t like I only like that genre or anything.”

Mikoto’s face turned red and she waved a hand in front of her face.

Suddenly, an explosive noise struck Mikoto’s eardrums.

“!! ….!?”

It was so sudden that she forgot to cover her ears and she was as surprised as if someone had struck her on the back. She turned around in the direction of the noise and saw a pirate ship floating in a waterway that seemed to have been directly cut out of the land. Smoke was floating up from the cannon on the side of the ship.

A large pirate captain-like man with a showy beard stood on the front of the ship and raised his arms in the air as he shouted in English.

“I have no duty to protect you small fries, but I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night if I abandoned you!! I’ll work for free, so you’d better be really damn thankful!!”

Immediately after Mikoto realized that was a famous line from a famous movie, the spectators around her cheered, applauded, and whistled. Seeing that reaction, the actor playing the captain gave a satisfied nod.

The pirate ship’s cannons then fired one after another.

Another ship had appeared at some point in the ocean beyond the beach putting it opposite the first ship. The second ship fired its cannons back.

The loud roar seemed to shake one’s entire head.

Mikoto finally covered her ears with her hands and yelled to Saten, Shirai, and Uiharu who stood right next to her.

“Wh-what’s going on!? Is this one of the park’s shows!?”

“Ohhhhhh!! That’s the Skull and the Broad from “The Pirates’ Scarlet”!! Now this is how you do an attraction at a movie city!!”

It seemed Saten had not heard Mikoto as she raised her hands in joy amid the roar.

Huge cannonballs were not actually being fired from the pirate ships. Most likely, blanks were being fired and gunpowder preset on the other ship was detonated at the same time. Even so, it was amazing how much the thick pirate ships were being destroyed.

Yet Mikoto felt a little dissatisfied that she had been forcibly made to participate in the event rather than choosing to go see it.

(I guess a quieter and calmer romance movie really does suit me better…)

Then Mikoto’s expression turned to a slightly puzzled one.

“Wait, are that waterway and that part of the ocean really deep enough for a ship to float in? I’m pretty sure people were swimming there just a bit a go.”

“Before the event, they have all the guests leave the water and then activate a device that can bring the bottom of the ocean either up or down. This place was originally just a spot in the middle of the ocean 50 kilometers from California, after all. We’re on a manmade island built on top of a rocky area, but normally no one would be able to touch the bottom.”

“I see,” Mikoto responded offhand.

After a bit, the pirate ship battle seemed to end. The people on the ships dove off and the ships themselves sank. It wasn't clear if the ships could dive, if they were on rails leading them down, or if it was some kind of trick. The normal guests didn't seem to particularly care. They merely applauded.

And then another great noise began.

A high-pitched engine noise assaulted Mikoto's ears.

It was not coming from a car.

The noise came from black supersonic stealth fighters flying through the sky from the land out to sea.

Saten excitedly pointed toward a unit made up of five of them.

"Gwahh! That's the Laveze squadron from Alien Wars!! America is so awesome!! The country of Hollywood sure does love their guns and weapons!!"

"I really prefer the style that delicately deals with people's emotions…"

Mikoto continued to mutter, but no one responded to her.

"Wah!" Uiharu said half in admiration and half in surprise as she looked up in the air.

"In the movie, they were supposed to be F-22's modified to fight UFO's, but they really did do it, Shirai-san. I heard each one cost over 15 billion yen."

"I'm sure they're just decorated to look like the movie specifications. Isn't that just an acrobatic model made from an F-35 with all the weaponry removed?"

Even so, they had purchased multiple modern fighters, modified them for filming, and were actually sending them into the sky. That was a scale that the idea would never even be brought up in a meeting in Japan.

"Ohh! They're fighting something over there!!" Saten yelled as she pointed toward the horizon.

It must have been a type of show that used explosives because multiple fighters were flying in sharp arcs through the air. The smaller curving contrails must have been created by fake missiles. Flashes of light as if from machine guns could also be seen. Instead of multiple repeated sounds a single continuous noise could be heard even there on the shore. It was very loud for blanks. It was quite an extravagant performance.

And the Laveze squadron was battling against…

“? …What is that?” asked Saten looking puzzled despite being the most well-informed of the group.

The object was on the water’s surface. It was an elliptical craft about 5 meters long. While it was elliptical, it was not shaped like a rugby ball. It had very acute angles like a canoe that had another canoe placed on top of it upside down. It also had a large and a small wing on the front of either side making it look a bit like a flying fish. No, since only the tips of the downwards pointing wings were touching the water’s surface and it seemed to kick the water as it advanced, it may have been more like a water bug. Whatever it looked like, the odd craft pushed itself along the sea at tremendous speed as if it were being repelled by the water. It was moving so fast, that a large amount of seawater shot into the air trailing after the flying fish.

The flying fish avoided the machine gun fire from the sky by moving in a slightly jagged path and fired missile-like objects in return. What looked like white contrails cut through the air.

“I’ve never seen that thing before. Uiharu, do you know what movie that’s from?”

“N-no.”

“The theme park has the support of the film company, so maybe this is a promo for some new movie. But the show is happening too far away. …Ah!? Don’t tell me this is some cheap attempt to get us to pay to rent binoculars!” Saten said and started looking around.

(…?)

Meanwhile, Mikoto frowned. Looking over at Shirai, she could tell the other girl was also a bit suspicious.

At first glance, it looked like nothing more than an attraction with the fighters in the sky and the flying fish on the sea, but there was something odd if you thought about it.

(How is that flying fish moving so fast?)

Mikoto had never heard of a ship capable of matching the speed of a fighter. Even if you included hovercrafts, the world’s fastest ships could only reach about 90 kph. Mach 1—that is, over 1200 kph—was completely unheard of.

Now, the flying fish was not a pure ship because it was floating off the ocean’s surface, but that brought issues of its own. The ocean had waves causing its surface to not be level. The mere fact that it was maintaining perfect attitude control at that speed was surprising.

“The scale of things sure is different in America. In Japan, they wouldn’t let you blow things up like that even over the ocean.”

It seemed Saten Ruiko thought it was just a show that used explosives.

The other tourists in the area were responding similarly. They were cheering and laughing and some were even yelling that the battle didn’t have enough of a presence and they needed to make it flashier.

However, Mikoto alone held some questions in her chest.

She thought for a bit as she stared at the battle unfolding on the distant horizon.

(It couldn’t be…?)

The sound of the explosions continued.

A missile had hit the side of the flying fish-like craft on the side and detonated.

The flying fish lost its balance and forcefully struck the ocean water.

“You’re kidding…!?”

Mikoto’s body stiffened.

The out-of-control flying fish ran up onto the beach and slammed into the sand.

The Liberal Arts City Air Defense Force, aka the five fighters of the Laveze squadron, flew around making sharp curves again and again at around 200 meters above the ocean surface.

The name of the enemy was Mixcoatl.

The term meant Serpent of the Sea of Clouds in some language and it referred to the four winged enemies that were almost gliding at high speed across the water avoiding the aim of the cutting edge fighters.

There were only two of them and yet the Laveze squadron made up of five fighters had yet to even scratch the enemy crafts. The waves were fairly high, but the Mixcoatls' four wings moved skillfully to keep them gliding quickly along the ocean without moving up and down in the slightest.

And the most surprising thing was that the Mixcoatls did not use steel plating like a normal military vessel. The acute main body was made of wood like a barrel and it looked like two canoes placed one on top of the other. The rest of it was made of cloth and obsidian. There was not a single bit of metal on it.

Those masses of wood and cloth that overturned the standard knowledge of modern weaponry were managing to prevent the cutting edge fighters from getting a lock by making slight movements back and forth that made their trajectory look jagged.

The pilot gripping the stick clicked his tongue.

“It won’t stay still!!”

As he aimed for the Mixcoatl that was fleeing across the sea, he fired with the machine gun. A line of bullet marks flew across like a sewing machine had been activated, but it was only across the ocean. The bullets did not manage to approach the Mixcoatl.

However, the Mixcoatl was forced to flee to the right in order to avoid the line of bullets. It was a predictable movement. The fighter managed to get a missile lock. The mark on the HUD indicated the lock was complete.

He immediately fired.

The missile that was released from the aircraft shot toward the ocean at tremendous speed. The explosive flew in a sharp arc and exploded in range of the Mixcoatl. A large amount of sea water was blown into the air making a white curtain.

“Dammit! Did I get him!?”

The pilot tried to peer through the great amount of white spray, but the fighter’s speed took him past the point in no time at all.

And then…

“You dumbass! Above you!!”

The pilot’s expression turned to shock upon hearing that transmission from a fellow pilot.

By the time he noticed the shadow above him, the Mixcoatl was already heading for him with its four wings spread out. A hole in the double canoe-like body aimed directly for the pilot’s body like the hole was a gun barrel.

(Did he jump up to avoid it in that instant!?)

“Damn you!!”

A normal aircraft would not have been able to do anything and would simply have had the cockpit blown away, but the pilot immediately increased the strength of his grip on the stick.

The fighter rotated.

It was a special maneuver meant to bring up the nose of the craft like it was doing a wheelie.

Knowing that air resistance would slow him down considerably, he forcibly pointed the nose toward the Mixcoatl above him. Doing so forcibly aimed his machine gun and missiles at the other craft.

The two had their weapons aimed at each other.

That standoff did not last even a second.

“Gwooooooohhhhhhhhhh!!”

As the pilot yelled, he pulled the trigger for the machine gun that was on the stick. With a roar, splinters and orange sparks flew from the front of the Mixcoatl, but no serious damage was done. The Mixcoatl fired something like a missile from the small hole opened on its main body.

The pilot thought he heard a slight sound as it was fired.

In an instant, something like an arrowhead that left behind a contrail was fired in the direction of the fighter. It stabbed into the fighter’s left horizontal stabilizer and mercilessly broke the wing off sending it flying off into the sky.

The pilot heard a fellow pilot telling him over the radio to use his parachute, but he did not do so.

The Mixcoatl seemed to be giving a sidelong glance to the damaged fighter as it finally started fall back toward the ocean having lost the lift from its great jump.

The fighter started to spin like a leaf now that it had lost that wing.

But that was not because the pilot had lost control because of the destroyed tail.

The pilot was using his skills to get the falling Mixcoatl in his sights.

“You motherfucker…”

Unlike when flying in a large circle in a loop-the-loop, the fighter was spinning around like its center had been skewered. The pilot fixed the craft pointing down toward the falling Mixcoatl as if the fighter were standing on end and he focused his last bit of strength into the stick.

“Did you think I was just gonna let you damage me and that’s that!?”

As he yelled, he fired an air-to-air missile at the Mixcoatl.

The flying fish headed her way at tremendous speed.

By the time Mikoto’s body stiffened, the flying fish had already run up onto the beach. A large amount of sand was knocked up into the air and the flying fish continued further on. As it scraped along the asphalt pathway, sparks flew and it finally struck the private showers for swimmers.

A portion of the smashed wall flew spinning through the air. The giant piece of rubble was over 3 meters long and it passed by over the sightseers heads.

“!!”

Immediately afterwards, light sparked from Mikoto’s bangs.

The white sand at her feet swelled up. No, technically it was the iron sand mixed in with the white sand. That iron sand formed a black sword which shot a few dozen meters into the air with snake-like movements where it mercilessly blew away the falling piece of rubble.

At first, the tourists merely stood there with blank expression, but a few moments later, multiple shouts pounded at Mikoto’s eardrums.

But…

“Wow!! Things really are different at Liberal Arts City!!”

“What was that? What was that advertising? When’s that coming out!?”

“Oh, so they started the show so far out to build up to this thrill.”

“So there was a performer mixed in here. You just can’t let your guard down at a movie city.”

“Who’s that girl? Asian performers are pretty rare. Was this a promotion for a new actress?”

“Oh, god. I’ve got sand in my mouth.”

The shouts were actually cheers being made in English.

Mikoto felt a chill run down her back.

(What are they saying…?)

Of course, Mikoto was not a performer for a show. That would seriously have been a major disaster if she had not interfered. However, they did not realize that fact. In the special area known as a movie city, no matter how crazy or strange things got, people treated it all like they were in an extended haunted house.

Mikoto had an unpleasant vision.

If she had not defended against that rubble, how would they have processed the disaster before their eyes? If there was someone collapsed on the ground covered in blood next to them would they think the person was a performer and the blood was fake?

Of course, there would be people who would know the victim. They would be saying that it was not an act and that the person was truly suffering, but would anyone believe them?

If the other people assumed the person crying was another actor, then it would truly seem like nothing real had happened. And if the crying people were made into the “performers” for the next attraction, all the uproar would be gone.

An attraction.

It was a situation brought about by being too used to peace.

It was a world where no one would believe something like that was happening even if it happened before their very eyes.

Was Liberal Arts City hiding something incredibly dangerous?

“…”

Suddenly, a terrible noise pounded at Mikoto’s ear drums. She looked over and saw the flying fish backing away from the private showers with squirming movements.

With that, it was made clear once more that it was an odd craft. It used no metal, its body was made of wood like a barrel, and its four wings were made of cloth and obsidian. Mikoto could not even take a guess at how it managed that amazing mobility when it was made of materials like that.

But that was not the time to be arguing over technology.

The problem was that the flying fish had started to move again while in the middle of the tourists.

(This is bad…)

The tourists around it felt no danger. Some of them even drew in closer to snap photos with their cell phones.

The body that looked like two canoes one on top of the other moved. A gun barrel-like hole on the body aimed toward the tourists trying to take pictures.

Something like a missile had been fired from there during the “show”.

“That…bastard!!”

“O-onee-sama!?”

Ignoring Shirai’s attempt to stop her, Mikoto started running along the sand toward the flying fish. Sparks flew from her bangs. A one billion volt lightning spear headed in a straight line and struck the side of the flying fish.

With a tremendous noise, the shock sent the flying fish’s body sliding to the side and the side that was struck remained slightly burnt.

But it did not stop.

The flying fish changed its aim from the sightseers to Mikoto. She heard an odd sound from the hole in the body.

“Dammit! So it really is using live ammo!?”

Mikoto’s body stiffened in shock.

It seemed to be a missile fired at high speed wrapped in a band of steam. Mikoto immediately shot the attack down with a lightning spear.

(I’m not quite sure on the specifics, but it might be a hydrogen propellant.)

She quickly moved her feet as she further approached the flying fish.

(Compressed hydrogen mixes with the oxygen in the air which ignites. I’m guessing it was wrapped in that band of steam because the hydrogen and oxygen bind together and form water after the explosion!!)

The flying fish must have decided to avoid any unnecessary risks because it used its four wings like feet to move back and away from Mikoto. It broke the palm trees growing on the side of the road as it moved from the beach to the more inland area. Its speed was not too great, but its insect-like movements were rather creepy.

The flying fish then slipped into the gap between two buildings.

“Ahh, dammit! Why can’t it just come back to the ocean!?”

Mikoto ran along and reached for the heel of her sandal. She forcefully pulled on something that was held on by a strap. What she pulled out like a special forces knife was plastic, 10 cm long, and looked like a handgun magazine. However, it held arcade coins rather than bullets. It was a type of coin holder.

(What is that thing anyway!? Is there someone inside? Or is it moving based on a program like a robot!?)

The flying fish must not have been made to move on land because it was not moving anywhere near as quickly as it had on the water. With its wings made of wood, cloth, and obsidian carefully crushed beneath it, the double canoe-like main body scraped along the ground as it moved.

Mikoto turned her focus toward the coin holder in her hand.

(I can use my Railgun…!!)

She could use electromagnetism to fire an arcade coin at three times the speed of sound. Using that to stop the flying fish as soon as possible would be the best method of preventing any more damage, but…

“!?”

Mikoto tried to use her thumb to bring an arcade coin from the coin holder, but it didn’t work. Having it held in her sandal must have been a mistake because sand was packed in the coin holder’s spring preventing the coin from coming out.

(Dammit. Why now of all times…!?)

On top of the artificially spread out white sand, innumerable tents were set up creating a type of shopping district. They were all souvenir shops for the tourists. Families wearing swimsuits were watching Mikoto and the flying fish while cheering. They clearly did not understand what was going on.

Mikoto made a bitter expression and the flying fish made another move.

The double canoe-like main body suddenly spun around 180 degrees and the longer two wings were used to lift it up. The shorter two wings were used like a carnivorous beast’s front arms and the entire craft covered up Mikoto as if to crush her.

Like the wings were a bear trap, they snapped shut with the speed of a hunting praying mantis.

“Oh, crap…!?”

Mikoto frantically tried to jump to the side, but she ended up directly below the flying fish. She was knocked to her back and the two wings held her arms in place.

The heat of the hot sand seemed to stab into her back, but that was the least of her worries.

She could see the bottom of the double canoe-like main body. The sharply angled body looked like a suspended ceiling above her. A rectangular portion of the bottom of the canoe was missing.

(What is that? …The cockpit!?)

That shocked Mikoto, but something else was more important.

That rectangular hole was most likely something like an emergency escape hatch. She now knew no one was inside. The pilot had fled while keeping the thing in an autopilot-like mode.

(Dammit!! When did that happen!?)

Mikoto gritted her teeth, but she noticed something blinking within the rectangular escape hatch. There were some hieroglyphs that Mikoto did not recognize even with her extensive knowledge and there were four numbers listed below them. She had no chance of understanding the hieroglyphs, but she could tell that the numbers were counting down.

Mikoto had a bad feeling about what that meant.

(Don’t tell me it has a self-destruct device!!)

She recalled the missile she had shot down that used a hydrogen explosive. If all of the missiles remaining in the craft detonated there, it would create quite a bit of damage and if the thing was loaded with liquid hydrogen specifically for the self-destruct…

“Dammit! This is no joke!!”

Mikoto tried to move her arms with such force that her face turned red, but they were being held too tightly. Also, the coin holder she needed for her Railgun had been knocked a bit away from her when she had been knocked down.

Still being held down by the giant flying fish, Mikoto moved her head. The tourists used to peace were showing no sign of fleeing.

“Wow! It looks so real!”

She looked over and saw a girl of about 10 approaching as if she were going to touch the craft out of interest.

If the countdown inside the escape hatch really was for a self-destruct device, then it would all disappear before long. The families that had come to create some enjoyable memories, the small children begging for ice cream, and the busy workers at the souvenir shops would all sink down into a sea of blood.

Mikoto heard a splitting sound.

It took her a few seconds to realize it was the sound of her own teeth biting into her lip.

“Perfect…”

She could not move her arms because they were being held down. The coin holder she needed for her Railgun was lying a bit away. It seemed like Mikoto could do nothing about the self-destruct device about to detonate, but that did not enter into her own thoughts. One should not underestimate the Ace of Tokiwadai Middle School, a prestigious school in Academy City. She was not the type to be defeated just because one or two of her trump cards were sealed off.

A great noise burst out.

It was the sound of a large amount of iron sand moving up from the white beach around her.

The mass of black powder spread out around the flying fish with a radius of 5 meters. It was both a barricade to keep the tourists from getting close and her final key to turning the situation around. According to Mikoto’s will, the great amount of iron sand attacked the flying fish from all sides and coated it 360 degrees around without leaving a single gap.

(If I don’t have a coin for my Railgun…)

Mikoto smiled.

Bluish-white sparks flew from her bangs indicating the presence of a high voltage electrical current.

(…then I’ll use you as my ammunition!!)

A tremendous roar rang out.

The giant flying fish that had been covering Mikoto was fired up into the sky.

The flying fish and the iron sand coating it was blown away. Of course, it was not a coin, so it did not reach three times the speed of sound, but that did not particularly matter. The giant flying fish flew away diagonally and was caught by gravity at an altitude of about 200 meters. It arced like a long throw in baseball, passed beyond the tourist area, and disappeared beyond the horizon.

And then a giant explosion occurred that drowned out all other noise.

Despite its great distance away, a few of the souvenir tents collapsed down onto the beach. At first the swimsuit-wearing tourists were surprised, but then they started pointing and laughing at the workers struggling to get out from under the collapsed tents. No matter what happened, it was all nothing more than a stimulating but safe show.

(Dammit! Where did the guy piloting that flying fish go!?)

Mikoto got up off the burning sand and brushed off the white sand stuck to her back and butt. Her eyes suddenly met with a small girl’s. The small girl stuck her little thumb up and spoke in English.

“Good job, miss.”

“…Thanks.”

Beverly Seethrough removed the binoculars from her eyes.

She had come to Liberal Arts City as a guest, so she did not know the attraction schedule well enough to know whether the Laveze squadron or those strange flying fish-like ships were on it or not.

But there was something she did know despite being left out like that.

That girl in the racing swimsuit was not part of the American staff.

She did not know the details of what had happened, but she assumed the girl had ended up joining in the show at the last second for some reason.

Beverly gave a dry laugh.

Sweat was moistening her hands holding the binoculars.

“That’s an Academy City esper for you. CG or VFX just can’t match that.”

A burning curiosity resided in her eyes.

Beverly swallowed and then licked her lips with her small tongue.

“…I suppose I can at least be satisfied that I met some interesting people.”

Chapter 2

Liberal Arts City was the world’s largest artificial island. It was created on the ocean 50 kilometers west of the California coast. After the filming of a certain movie, it had been remodeled into a certain type of theme park, but the large movie country of America saw value in having it also function as a large facility for research and development of new filming techniques.

It was a collection of attractions that were created by those working on the front lines of the world’s movie business. Those attractions were first seen there and were overflowing with stimulation and wonder.

But Misaka Mikoto knew something.

She knew that every kind of abnormal situation was treated as a “show” there. Even if someone was shot right in front of people’s eyes, they would merely be surprised that an actor had been mixed in with the crowd, surprised at how well the actor was showing pain, and surprised at how real the fake blood looked.

It was an area where no one would be shocked upon seeing a corpse.

And that atmosphere was no coincidence.

There was Saten Ruiko.

“Wow, Misaka-san!! When did they get you to join the show!?”

Even after seeing Mikoto get involved in a real incident, she thought it was part of a show.

There was Uiharu Kazari.

“I-Is it really okay to show off Academy City powers publicly like that?”

She was a little worried, but she was worried about the wrong thing.

There was Shirai Kuroko.

“…Onee-sama?”

She was a little suspicious, but it had nothing to do with an incident or a fight.

And then there was Misaka Mikoto herself.

“…What is going on here?” she muttered.

No one could hear her quiet voice that had a bit of annoyance mixed in.

“Just what is going on in this city?”

Fwoom.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!”

Whoosh.

“Mgyaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!”

Fwoosh.

“Funyaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!”

Uiharu Kazari let out all those yells and then exited the private showers lined up near the hotel. She had been playing in the ocean all day until the sun went down, but all the seawater on her soft skin had been washed away. In fact, there was not a drop of water on her hair, skin, or swimsuit and the smell of salt water was completely gone.

She lightly tugged on the swimsuit that looked like she had just bought it and then her classmate, Saten Ruiko, approached her swinging an arm around.

The area was getting dark and the richly colored lights characteristic of theme parks had been turned on, but Saten was still the same as ever.

“Oh, Uiharu. How was it? Wasn’t that amazing!?”

“Was that thing a full body dryer? That’s a pretty major device. It washes and dries your swimsuit and your body as well…”

“Well, you wear your swimsuit everywhere except for your hotel room bed here, right? They’d rather you were clean and dry when you enter the hotel.”

Uiharu and Saten continued to give noises of admiration.

They lived in Academy City where the technology was about 20 or 30 years ahead, but Academy City was in western Tokyo, so they did not have many opportunities to use technology related to the ocean. That kind of research would obviously be done in Academy City, but the children of the city did not get a chance to use it.

Saten rubbed her upper arms.

“…But Liberal Arts City sure is cheap to charge for the cream that keeps the dryer mode from drying up your skin.”

“Ah ha ha. Yes. The theme park builds up this image with everything from the scenery down to the smallest details, but when they start bringing up money, it takes you back to reality.”

“And that wind pressure was amazing. It shot my breasts right out of my top.”

“Bfoeh!? S-Saten-san…?”

“Yeah, maybe I shouldn’t have hit the quick dry switch. And my top is supposed to stick to my skin like a NuBra…Wait, if you were wearing a normal bikini, they’d be blown out for sure!”

Uiharu blushed at that topic of conversation, but there must not have been anyone around who knew Japanese because the passing foreigners did not look their way.

Saten Ruiko cared the least about her surroundings and she grabbed Uiharu’s hand.

“Okay, let’s go find Misaka-san and Shirai-san and then go get some dinner!”

“By the way, why did all the food on the menu at lunch have the titles of movies?”

“That restaurant gives you the food that appeared in various movies. If you aren’t familiar with the movie, you’ll have no idea what food you’ll be getting.”

“…I see. So that’s why I got a toothpaste-like tube of space food when I ordered Alien Wars.”

Uiharu had a distant look in her eyes as she and Saten entered the hotel.

“Oh, right. Have you checked in with the teacher? We have to do it in the morning and in the evening, right?”

“The roll call is after dinner. We’re free to eat anywhere we want. But I can’t believe we have to line up in front of the hotel as they call out our names. How lame. That makes it obvious we’re here on a school trip.”

The large hotel had over 800 rooms. It was mainly made of sparkling white marble with a few amber accents made of wood. Red carpet was laid out on the path the guests would take like it was some sort of movie palace.

People of all sorts of races were coming and going in the lobby making it clear that the city was popular all over the world.

“Are you bothered by all the guys looking at you, Uiharu? A leer is the same worldwide.”

“…I’m sure it’s you and your bikini that’s drawing attention, Saten-san.”

“Heh. But the way you’re fidgeting oddly and rubbing your thighs together is much sexier.”

“Ee!? I-I’m not….!”

Saten walked through the large atrium lobby that an entire large passenger plane could fit inside. Uiharu walked next to her and then suddenly asked her classmate a question.

“By the way, what do you want to eat for dinner? Even this hotel has plenty of restaurants in it.”

“Hmm. I’m kinda in the mood for Chinese. Well, I can just ask the hotel manager where a good restaurant is.”

“Oh, Saten-san, you can speak English?”

Uiharu held a waterproof cell phone in her hand. She had downloaded a voice recognition application that also translated for her, so she could speak Japanese into it and it would speak in English for her. Uiharu only had a first year middle school textbook knowledge, so the instant the battery died, she was dead in the water.

“Ah ha ha. We’re both humans right? I can get my words across through feeling alone. Hey, you, boy! Chinese food want eat delicious restaurant please!?”

“Gyaaahh!! I-I don’t think that’s going to cut it! You can only fumble around so much!!”

Uiharu started blushing, but the hotel worker must have managed well enough with the words and nuance Saten had thrown at him because he explained mostly via gestures that they had to take a turn up ahead and they would find one.

Saten nodded confidently.

“It seems there is an amazingly good Chinese restaurant, but it gets really busy around this time so we should wait until later. What do you think, Uiharu? If you’re so hungry you need to eat now, we can go somewhere else.”

“…A-am I just a very unsophisticated girl?”

Saten cheerfully handed a tip to the hotel worker and then waved at him as Uiharu felt slightly depressed.

They decided to look for Mikoto and Shirai so they could eat that amazingly good Chinese food and then Mikoto appeared out of the elevator hall with perfect timing.

But her face was red and she was running as quickly as she could.

“Gyyyyyyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“Wai—wha—M-Misaka-san!?”

Uiharu called out her name and Mikoto immediately turned her head in that direction.

However, she remained silent.

With a clear liquid welling up at the edges of her eyes, Mikoto ran straight for Uiharu. She leapt into Uiharu’s arms and refused to let go.

“Funyaaaahhhh!? Wh-wh-wh-wh-what is this all of a sudden, Misaka-san!?”

“I-I was scared!! I was so scared!!”

As Mikoto yelled, she was trembling and she was rubbing her nose into Uiharu’s small chest.

Saten placed a hand on her chin.

“Uiharu, this might be that cute kind of development where it turns out the ultimate invincible Ace of Tokiwadai is actually super afraid of roaches.”

“No. This is in a completely different dimension!!”

Mikoto finally pulled her face out of Uiharu’s chest and held out a magazine in her hand.

It seemed to be a swimsuit catalogue.

“K-Kuroko was reading this! She was muttering something about choosing another one. I casually looked over and now I don’t know what to do!!”

Uiharu and Saten grabbed the catalogue from Mikoto and started flipping through the pages.

And then they seriously regretted that encounter with the unknown.

“G-gyaaahhhh!? Uiharu, this is…wait, what!? I can manage—just barely—to understand the T back here, but this is an O and this is a V and this…Eh? An I!?

How is that supposed to stay on!?”

“L-look at this, Saten-san. It says it’s a low leg, but there’s only 5 centimeters from the inseam to the waist!! It’s like it’s a…belt?”

“Watering material…? This is a see-through bikini with colored liquid inside…is that really okay!? It says the pattern changes depending on the slant of your body, but can you really not see anything through it!?”

“A reflective crystal bikini…? This is basically a mosaic! It’s true you can’t see things properly, but the color remains the same!!”

Saten and Uiharu’s faces were bright red as they started to wonder what kind of inhuman punishment game would lead to wearing things like that. Every item in the catalogue was full of danger to a maiden on the level of no longer being able to be a bride.

Misaka Mikoto, the Ace of Tokiwadai, sobbed which was rare for her.

“Th-there’s no guarantee that she only brought one swimsuit. What if Kuroko is still hiding an even worse bomb? I-if Kuroko clings to me wearing something with even more of an impact than the one from today…what am I supposed to do!?”

If someone wearing those kinds of things was walking next to them or clinging to her, Saten and Uiharu would be embarrassed, too. They could not just leave such an obscene girl to her own devices.

But what were they supposed to do about it?

Was there an effective method of sealing that pigtailed monster that was like an incarnation of freedom of expression?

The three of them silently thought for a bit and then an older girl passed by them who looked like some sort of celebrity having just finished a lovely dinner. She was wearing a black one piece swimsuit with sparkling gold thread sewn into it and a large pareo wrapped around her waist.

The three girls watched the celebrity-like girl’s butt as she walked off seemingly purposefully shaking her hips back and forth.

"A pareo! That's it!!"

At that same time, Shirai Kuroko was rolling around in her bed still wearing the same swimsuit while digging through a ridiculously huge suitcase.

"Hmm… Just being highly revealing may not be enough. This one looks like a white school swimsuit at first, but it all becomes see through except for the three most important points when it gets wet. Maybe this one. It's a string swimsuit that makes seven different transformations while wearing it. Heh heh heh… Onee-sama's face when it transforms in front of her eyes would be something to see…"

Shirai was holding a swimsuit that did not have even a millimeter of cloth and was made of braided strings so it covered up the bare minimum of space. She laughed as she plotted something, but then the electronic lock to her room's door started making odd noises.

"What? What?"

The instant Shirai looked over, the door burst open. Misaka Mikoto entered with sparks crackling from her bangs.

Seeing that, stars starting sparkling in Shirai's eyes.

"Oh!? My, my, Onee-sama!? I never thought you would be so in the mood that you would break my lock to sneak a visit to my roo—gwoohhh!? Ah, it's so hot in this thing!? What's with this large piece of cloth!?"

"It's called a pareo! It's meant to cover up the delicate zone of shyer people! Everything about you is worth being shy over, so it's going to cover up all of you!!"

"S-stop, stop!! Don't wrap me up like a teru teru bouzu! And this is more like an elementary school swimming towel than a pareo…mghgmghg…."

Uiharu and Saten had heard the commotion from out in the hall and then they heard the sound of the door opening. The looked over and saw Mikoto looking oddly refreshed.

“Okay, we’re ready! Now we can freely enjoy dinner.”

“??? What about Shirai-san…Ee!?”

Uiharu Kazari’s shoulders jumped when she saw Shirai Kuroko wrapped up from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet many times over with a large piece of cloth making her look like some kind of lame bigfoot.

After eating dinner in a mostly red Chinese restaurant within the hotel, Mikoto, Shirai, Uiharu, and Saten met up with the other students and the teachers carried out the roll call (that Saten claimed was lame). After that, the four of them gathered in the hotel lobby. They sat at a table in the rest area and relaxed as they ate desserts like almond jelly and ice cream.

Shirai had managed to get just her head out of the pareo.

“By the way, about that Beverly Seethrough we met today…”

She used a small spoon to scoop up some milk pudding as she spoke.

Beverly was a girl film director staying in Liberal Arts City.

“It seems the facility for research and development of new filming technology is real. It seems they have invited painters, sculptors, potters, doll makers, clockmakers, ukiyoe artists, and all sorts of other artists.”

“Ahn? That doesn’t sound like a Hollywood movie to me. That sounds more in the direction of a traditional craft or something. Why are they calling all sorts of people like that?” asked Mikoto with a spoon in her mouth making the spoon move up and down as she spoke.

“About that!!”

“Mgh!?”

The spoon fell from Mikoto’s mouth as a sudden loud voice came from behind her.

She turned around and saw the genius girl film director walking there.

“Did you finish your work?”

“It was really more of an inconvenient process required of us, so I wouldn’t really say it was part of my work. Now back to the topic at hand,” Beverly said nonchalantly. “Liberal Arts City—or rather, the rival spirit of the American film companies—has turned in the direction of the leading edge of the science side, Japan’s Academy City. They have concluded that they can’t win just by simply developing further technology such as CG or VFX. As such, they want to grow in a different direction from Academy City and they think a hint may lie in the more traditional arts.”

However, they were not simply planning to make a movie out of puppets or anything. Once they had perfectly analyzed the traditional art, they would check to see if it could be used in cutting edge films and then try to put it all together.

“And there are many different types of movies. Some have ancient dinosaurs and some have giant robots in the future. These traditional arts can of course be used for the historical movies, but they can also be studied to see in what way the arts evolved to help predict future evolutions of such things when creating a city set in the future.”

“Hehh,” Uiharu said in a very Japanese sound of admiration. “But is everyone cooperating? I think of potters as being stubborn old men.”

“Ah ha ha. Well, there’s a lot to this. Those kinds of arts are falling into decline all over the world. It isn’t unusual for these kinds of things to disappear altogether. Since Hollywood is taking great efforts to preserve them, they’re actually incredibly happy about the whole thing. They’ve even got things like a traditional Japanese workshop.”

If Academy City was a collection of cutting edge science, then that place was the opposite. It was a city created from a collection of traditional techniques from all over the world.

Mikoto and Uiharu gave more sounds of admiration, but Saten seemed not to be interested with that inside story. Her eyes were glued to Beverly’s giant breasts and she elbowed Uiharu in the side.

“(…Hey, Uiharu. What unprecedented cup size do you think she’s reached? I think she’s secretly made it to G or even I.)”

“Bgfh!?”

Uiharu choked and a few flower petals floated away from her head.

“Hm? They’re L,” Beverly responded.

“!?”

“!?”

“!?”

“!?”

An immeasurable shock pierced into those still-growing maidens. Saten regretted having brought it up, most of the flowers on Uiharu’s head fell out, Shirai’s eyes opened wide, and physical sparks crackled from Mikoto’s back.

Saten was unable to move for a bit, but she finally managed to bring her hands to her flat chest.

“…Uiharu. Your cup size levels up every 2.5 cm, right?”

“Y-yes,” Uiharu nodded.

“A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L,” Saten muttered under her breath as she moved her hands away from her chest at set intervals.

Finally, her hand stopped.

Saten looked down at her own chest to check on the hopeless gap between her hands and her small chest.

“That’s a huge gap!! Look at how much space there is here! Wait, this looks like I’m pantomiming hugging Uiharu!”

“Eeee!? Y-your calculations say my entire body would be buried in the boobs!?”

Saten was in a state of confusion and Uiharu was yelling in a shrill voice. The winner at life, Beverly, watched them and laughed.

“Don’t worry. Your body will grow on its own whether you do anything about it or not. After all, breasts are nothing more than masses of fat.”

“There it is!! The favorite line of the bourgeois winners!! Uiharu, bring out the sun oil. Let’s oil up the entire body of this girl and her pointlessly huge breasts!! Let’s show her what tears taste like!!”

“Ah ha ha. You don’t scare me,” Beverly laughed.

Suddenly, there was a great noise like a beer stein or a judge’s gavel being slammed down. It was caused by Misaka Mikoto slamming the bottle of oil on the table.

The flat-chested girl was hanging her head down so her expression could not be seen and her entire body was wrapped in a dark shadowy aura.

“Hey, you,” she said while barely moving her lips.

Mikoto slowly raised her head as a rumbling sound effect could be heard in the background.

Her eyes glowed like a carnivorous beast’s as she stared straight at Beverly and spoke like a drill sergeant.

“I’ll teach you that sun oil can sometimes be an excellent weapon.”

Misaka Mikoto watched Beverly Seethrough’s shiny retreating back with its slumped shoulders. She then high fived Saten, punched Shirai Kuroko who was trying to rub the oil on her body, and then returned to her senses at a comment from Uiharu.

“Uh? Weren’t you going to get Beverly-san’s autograph?”

(Dahh!! There’s just too much going on.)

An overseas trip just had too many things to do.

Mikoto returned to her hotel room because she knew it would be bad if she forced herself to stay in such high spirits all the way until morning. She entered the bathroom, turned on the sink faucet, and washed all the oil off of her hands.

“Hoo…”

She returned to the main room and sat on the bed.

She could see a summer night through the window. The buildings and pathways were of course decorated with various types of lights. She could see a large number of fireworks bursting in the distance and the dark ocean was being used as a screen to display various images.

(The pamphlet said something about a night swim in the ocean of light, but I just don’t feel like swimming right now. I think I had too much fun during the day because I’m kind of tired.)

Mikoto wanted to just collapse into the bed, but she did not do so.

There was still something she had to do.

“…”

There had been that battle between the fighters and the flying fish during the day.

And there had been that strange situation where everything was dealt with as if it had been a show.

She did not know what was going on in that city, but she had to stop it before another flying fish came and someone ended up dead. At the very least, Liberal Arts City had definitely intentionally hidden the incident by using the term “show” to make it disappear despite it happening right before people’s eyes.

(But then…)

She was not in Japan’s Academy City.

If she investigated into the secrets of the city, she could easily be shot on the grounds of protecting their information. It sounded like something from a movie, but she was not in Japan. She could not forget that she was in a place where anyone could easily get their hands on a gun.

“…”

Mikoto thought for a bit.

And then she nodded.

In that dangerous situation, Liberal Arts City had not provided emergency exits or even sounded an alarm. She could not exactly have a fun, carefree time knowing that. She could get wrapped up in a fight between fighters and flying fish again. Or some other “show” could take place. There was even a chance that her or some other visitor could end up being made into guest performers as the ones that get taken out.

Even though she had managed to stop it the first time, there was no guarantee that she would be able to stop it the next time.

“I guess I’ll do this.”

She looked over at the corner of the room where a device like a convenience store ATM was located. Liberal Arts City was an ocean and water theme park. That made it difficult to carry paper money around, so visitors borrowed an IC card upon entering and it could be charged with electronic money whenever needed. This allowed visitors to go to any facility they wanted with just that one card and small change to use for tips.

Mikoto lightly rubbed the chip portion of the IC card with her thumb. She then pushed the card up against the reader for charging it. With a beep, it switched from the simple screen for guests to a cold and efficient screen for the maintenance staff.

She had used her electric ability to hack in.

She passed her thumb over the IC chip again returning the monetary information back to normal. She then began typing on the keyboard displayed on the touch panel monitor.

She wanted all the information on the attractions and shows taking place in the city.

It seemed that information was not held on that computer itself, so she started to hack into Liberal Arts City’s local network.

“Wah!? ...What the hell?” Mikoto cried out as she looked at the screen.

She did not cry out because she was faced with extremely difficult security.

It was the opposite.

(Wah! Wah! I had heard that Academy City’s technology was 20 or 30 years ahead of the rest of the world, but I can’t believe their system is written in such an old style of language… This is like seeing a car running on coal.)

It was so simple that Mikoto felt it might be a trap.

But of course, not every student living in Academy City could do that kind of thing. Mikoto was both enough of a genius to go to Tokiwadai Middle School and she was the strongest esper in the category of electrical powers.

To her, Liberal Arts City’s security was not even at the level of a bucket with a hole in it. It was more like a bucket made of cotton cloth.

And the information she got was real.

The “show” with the fighters and the flying fish after the pirate ships had indeed been a real battle.

(They have 50 interceptor fighters based on F-35s and made to look like the ships from Alien Wars. This armored clothing and these rifles are…for the officials? I see. Those aren’t costumes. They really are fully equipped. And these aren’t even replicas. They’re all real guns. And they have tanks, armored vehicles…and PAC-3’s? Wait, those are surface-to-air missiles meant to intercept nuclear missiles! What kind of threat are they expecting!?)

From what she could see, Liberal Arts City had more firepower than an American military base in Japan. However, the area did not have the intimidating air of a military run facility. It seemed like they knew a powerful enemy was coming, so they were frantically gathering as much firepower as they could.

An enemy.

It couldn’t just be a spy from the film industry.

Then who was this enemy?

(…)

Mikoto recalled the flying fish that flew across the ocean earlier that day. Its movements had clearly not been something that could be easily done with the technology outside of Academy City. What had it been?

However, no matter how much she investigated into the mysterious object that had been fighting the fighters, she could not find any information on it. It was not that there was special security or encryption keeping her from the information. And she doubted Liberal Arts City did not have a single piece of information on it.

The term “cut off” passed through Mikoto’s mind.

The truly important data would not be connected to the network. That was why Mikoto was unable to access it just by gathering information through the network. She had access to the entire system, but with only that she was still missing a few pieces of the puzzle.

(…Going any further will be difficult.)

Mikoto completely gave up and exited the depths of the system with even more caution than when she entered it. She logged out from the network, checked to make sure no logs of what she had done remained, and then switched the IC card charger from staff mode to guest mode.

“Now then.”

Mikoto left the charger and headed for the exit of the hotel room.

From the layout of Liberal Arts City, she had a good idea of where this computer was that held the information she could not get through the network.

"From here on out, I need to investigate physically."

Even at night, Liberal Arts City was not lacking in light. Various sources of illumination lit up the buildings, a parade was being held along the roads, and lasers were being used to create art made of light on the ocean and the pools.

But even all that was not enough to completely wipe away the darkness.

Areas far away from the hotels such as the central inland area of the city were surrounded by darkness.

(…I guess this is the place.)

Mikoto was walking along the white sand a distance from the promenade built over the beach.

Standing before her was a large facility.

It was an area of about 3 kilometers in every direction with a facility made up of a multitude of rectangular buildings both large and small. Towering above everything else in the center was a full size model of a large rocket.

It may have been intentional, but the large rocket in the center made it all look a bit like a tough castle made of steel and concrete.

The name of the facility was Large Launcher.

It seemed Liberal Arts City had originally been created for the filming of an SF movie. According to the pamphlet, that rocket launch pad, Large Launcher, had been incredibly important in the film. Almost every part of the city had been remodeled for sightseeing purposes and pathways had been prepared, but that launch pad alone had been preserved as the location of a famous scene. It seemed a large number of fans had started a petition in order to ensure it stayed that way.

The Large Launcher was lit up by various light sources and there were viewing platforms, Ferris wheels, and large hotels from which it could be viewed. Despite being off limits, it was a popular place that drew in a lot of visitors.

Mikoto was at the outer wall of the facility. She was at a maintenance entrance that was wrapped in darkness away from all the bright lights.

At first glance, it was a completely normal door, but that was just the outer appearance.

It may actually have been an entrance to the secret behind the mystery that Mikoto was investigating.

(…)

Mikoto looked around to ensure that no one else was around.

She then silently approached the outer wall and reached over toward the door and its electronic lock.

And then…

“Oh? What are you doing here, Misaka-san?”

Mikoto’s entire body jumped upon hearing Saten Ruiko’s sudden voice coming from behind her. After all, she was 5 seconds away from unlocking the door to an off limits zone. The electronic lock’s display was made so it could be understood regardless of what language one spoke, so it would be difficult to talk oneself out of that situation.

Workers entered and exited the area to maintain the rocket launch pad set, but Mikoto guessed that it was actually being used for a different purpose.

She could not bring Saten there.

Mikoto frantically put on a smile and moved her arms around as she spoke.

“Um, well…you see? The hotel’s air conditioned air is nice, but it’s too uniform and it’s messing with my bodily rhythm, so I wanted to get a taste of the real night air.”

An electronic beep was emitted by the door behind her indicating it had been unlocked.

She ignored it and continued speaking.

“Preferences for the natural are really something like an illusion. I know that there’s nothing that can’t be analyzed scientifically, but there’s just a psychological effect, y’know? Real palm trees aren’t something you get to see every day.”

“What was that beeping just now?”

“……………………………………………..”

Mikoto’s eyes wandered back and forth after Saten pointed that out right away.

Before Mikoto could say anything more, Saten gasped as if she had realized something.

“Y-you don’t mean…this is…!?”

“Wha-? Wait…Eh? No, this is…this isn’t…!!”

“This is the casino authorized by America that is said to be somewhere in the city!!”

“What?” Mikoto’s eyes turned to dots.

Saten’s eyes started sparkling as if she had caught scent of something dangerous.

“You met Beverly-san later and she told you about it, didn’t she!? You asked her what you do in Liberal Arts City in the seasons when you can’t go swimming and she told you there were places for more adult ways of having fun! Kuhaaah!! A casino!! That entertainment of money and desire that can’t be had in Japan!! I always wanted to see one at least once if I ever went overseas. But will they really let a middle schooler in?”

In Saten Ruiko’s mind was an image of lines of slot machines with piles of coins pouring out like they were broken. Saten was wearing her swimsuit and being swallowed up by the ocean of gold with a gigantic grin on her face. Ladies and gentlemen dressed in tuxedos and cocktail dresses were circled around her at a distance while a pair of red bunny girls were standing on either side of her giving her a baptism of kisses. “Ga ha ha ha ha! This is it! This is the nonstop flight from Las Vegas to the American Dream!” she shouted while immersed and intoxicated by her happy vision.

In Misaka Mikoto’s mind was an image of Saten staring blankly at the Baccarat table as her last chip was taken by the dealer. “Hand over everything you have on you. We’re taking everything that’s worth anything at all.” “No, no. All I have is this swimsuit.” “Then we’ll start with that!” was how the scene played out in her head when she remembered how Saten had a knack for getting into trouble. In the end, she knew it would end up with her barging into the casino and blowing away all the villains with her Railgun.

“C’mon, Misaka-san! I won’t let you say that the casino is for celebrities only!! I just want a peek! Just a peek!!”

“N-no. And this isn’t even a casino!!”

“Ha ha!!”

Saten didn’t even listen to what Mikoto was saying as she opened the door to the off limits zone and charged into that dangerous area.

(Ahhhhh!? That idiooooottttttttt!!)

Mikoto scratched at her head with both hands as she yelled internally before heading after Saten who had disappeared into the darkness. On the other side of the maintenance door was a narrow passageway. It had cables strewn about and tools left on the ground like the backstage of a theatre, so it was obvious at first glance that it did not lead to some facility of enjoyment.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhh! Casinos sure are dangerous! This wild and undecorated feeling has such an immoral atmosphere to it!”

“You don’t even know what a real casino is like, do you? And like I said: this isn’t a casino…”

Mikoto felt exhausted as she somehow managed to catch up to Saten.

Up until that point, there had already been a few sensors mostly of the infrared variety, but Mikoto had used her electrical attacks to rather forcibly “fool” them. She didn’t think she had left a trace, but she was rather uncertain due to her crude method.

(But if I hadn’t done that, they’d be closing in on us armed with guns right about now. For now, I need to get this ridiculous girl to come to her senses…Wah!?)

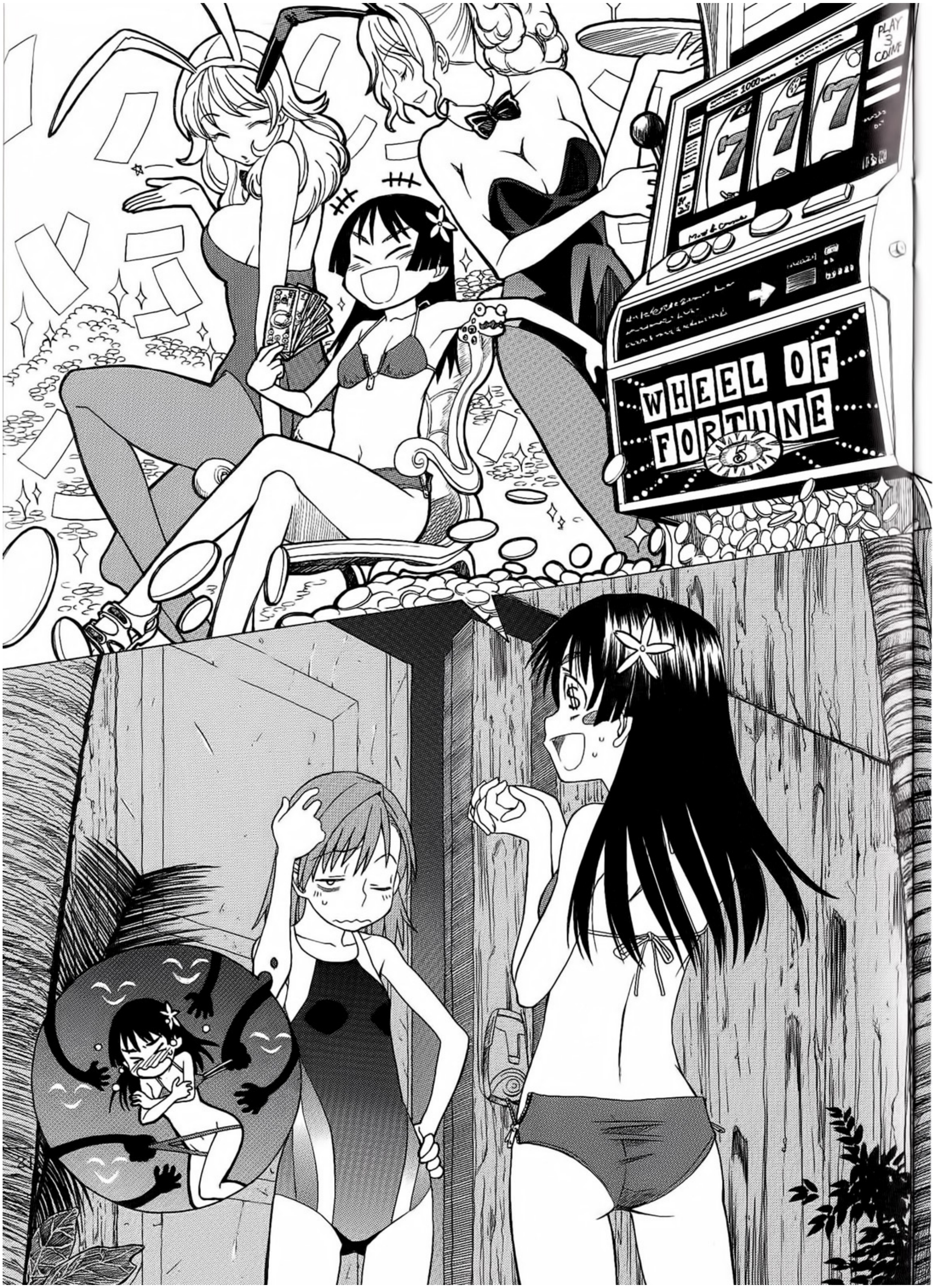
Mikoto frantically grabbed Saten’s shoulder and pulled her back just as the smiling girl was about to head into an infrared zone.

(How can she head so thoughtlessly into such a dangerous area? I think that may be a type of talent.)

“S-Saten-san. I need to talk to you about something.”

“What? Let’s just hurry up and get to the casino. Wait! You don’t mean it’s a true super celebrity place that you need a membership for, do you!? C’mon, Misaka-san. Can’t you use your connections to get me in?”

“L-like I said, this isn’t a casino. I only came here because I have business to take care of. There’s nothing fun like that here.”


PLAY 3 COINS
1000
777
WHEEL OF FORTUNE

“Ohh, so it’s not a casino. I wonder if there’s anything else interesting in here then.”

As she spoke, Saten started to head back on the path she had come in on.

Mikoto grabbed Saten’s shoulder again.

She had only temporarily “fooled” the sensors, so their basic functionality was not gone. If Saten turned back there, the chain of events would clearly be “alarm -> captured -> shot”. Mikoto was the only one who could do anything about the security (and it was entirely possible that Saten would open some other door partway back and get lost), so she had no choice but to take Saten with her.

But Mikoto wasn’t sure how to explain it to her.

“…Something interesting is about to start, isn’t it?” Saten said with a grin as Mikoto still held her shoulder. “As a newcomer, I don’t know the details, but something truly interesting is about to begin, isn’t it?”

(She’s hopeless.)

It seemed the great Ace of Tokiwadai Middle School could not stand people who had a knack for getting into trouble.

(It’s like Area 51.)

Mikoto was reminded of that air force base in the middle of the desert that was a top secret facility and had many rumors including those about aliens preserved in formaldehyde or analysis of crashed UFOs. She might have been more easily reminded of that because she was in America.

They had walked along the short passageway breaking through the security as they went (or rather, Mikoto did all the work with her power while Saten just walked along) until they reached a large space that was what had brought that thought to Mikoto’s mind.

It was a rectangular area.

The area was made of iron and concrete, it was about 1.5 kilometers in every direction and it was almost 20 meters tall. The roof was strengthened with a complex metal framework much like a school gym and lights hung down at set intervals illuminating the large room. Narrow steel passageways ran across at about 10 meters above the flat concrete floor.

Saten looked around the area and spoke in admiration.

“Wow. Just this building alone shows the difference in scale between America and Japan.”

“…”

Saten’s innocent comment resounded about in an unpleasant way.

There did not seem to be anyone inside the facility and Saten’s voice had the same feeling to it as when someone gave a yell in an empty gym.

Mikoto’s face naturally stiffened at the sight of that dreadfully large space.

The facility was clearly not there for the purposes of amusement. Nor was it a space for the officials and workers to make preparations in order to please the tourists.

Most likely, that facility was the true center of Liberal Arts City.

(But the scale of things in America really is different…I can’t believe the largest landmark of the city is actually something like this.)

Mikoto looked around the large rectangular area again.

She had once seen a certain show on television.

It had been a quiz show. A certain object was being created in a factory. The question had asked what was being made. The answer had been a large passenger plane. The area reminded her of the footage they had shown then.

However, the large space was not storing round airplane parts.

It was storing the same type of flying fish that had been battling the fighters earlier that day.

The main body was about 5 meters long, made of acute angles, and made of wood. The sharp body looked like it had been made from an upside down canoe placed on top of another canoe and each side had a large wing and a small wing on it. The strange hovercraft was made of things like cloth and obsidian rather than metal.

The flying fish was enshrined like a butterfly specimen as if it was being studied.

However, the one there appeared to be defective…or rather, damaged. A giant hole had been smashed near the center of the canoe and the entire body was bent into a shallow V-shape. One of the wings had been broken off and was merely lying on the ground next to it.

“Hehh. This is the thing they used in the show today, isn’t it? Is this a tool room for their performances?”

Mikoto did not nod in response to Saten’s question.

(…No. This isn’t the one from today.)

The flying fish Mikoto had fought had been blown to pieces by its self-destruct device in the end. That did not match up with that body that had been forcibly bent from an outside force.

Which meant…

(There isn’t just one of them. So was today not the only attack?)

She looked around again and noticed more flying fish. It looked like the kind of makeshift morgue set up after plane crashes that would be seen in dramas sometimes. Instead of having body bags lined up, the broken flying fish were lined up at even intervals. There were more than 200 of them there.

Each individual flying fish was lit up by a spotlight and no two were destroyed in the same way. Some had the front crushed in, some had all the wings broken off, some were missing the entire back half, and some were just a bunch of crushed parts laid out on the floor in the shape of the flying fish. It seemed all the flying fish that had been shot down up until then were stored there implying the history of intense fighting that had been occurring.

Mikoto approached one of the broken flying fish and spotted something like a plastic tag stuck to it. It had a string of letters of the alphabet and numbers on it. The numbers seemed to be a sort of code. Other than what looked like a date, the code was completely random. Without seeing the way Liberal Arts City used the code, it was meaningless data. The letters of the alphabet seemed to be some kind of name. It was a long word that started with an “m”. Mikoto didn’t think it was English, but it didn’t look like French or Italian either. It was a ridiculous spelling that looked like a language that did not use the alphabet had been forcibly spelled out.

“What is this? M…Mix…Mixca…no, Mixco maybe?”

Mikoto looked puzzled as she tried to read it. She couldn’t stay there for too long, so she thought about taking a picture of it with her cell phone so she could try to figure it out later, but…

“It’s Mixcoatl. It’s a Central American word that I’m told means Serpent of the Sea of Clouds.”

Mikoto and Saten turned around at that sudden female voice.

They had no idea how long she had been there, but a Liberal Arts City official stood there. The woman seemed to be in her mid-twenties and she was wearing an orange lifejacket over a sporty racing swimsuit.

She had her ID card hanging from her neck, so they immediately knew what her name was. The card said Olive Holiday.

Mikoto stuck her fist up to her head and spoke.

“Um, sorry. We’re kind of lost…”

“Ha ha. So you’re going to play dumb. If you want a job as a performer, you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Tch.”

Mikoto glared at Olive and took a step forward so she could more easily protect

Saten.

“You’re not going to tell us these are costumes for some kind of hero show, are you?”

“Is that how you see us?”

Olive shook her head while smiling.

“Playing everything off as a show requires the proper atmosphere. If we opened this up as a large underground hanger after building an entrance gate, charging money, having officials lead them in, and playing loud sound effects and visual effects, then people would believe that it was a large set we spent lots of money creating. It’s all the result of our great efforts, so please don’t act like it’s something that’s easily done.”

“…So you’re aware you’ve been found out. You’re getting attacked by these unknown enemies because there’s something here worth it, so you can’t fool me anymore,” said Mikoto with a sneer ignoring Saten who had been left behind in the conversation.

“Yes.” Olive Holiday slowly nodded. “It looks like I have no choice but to do it.”

“Do what?”

“This can no longer end quietly.”

A chill ran over Mikoto.

A killer intent exploded out from the official’s smile. Even Saten who had no idea what was going on started trembling behind Mikoto having finally realized the gravity of the situation.

Mikoto made sure her body did not tense up.

“What are you doing here? Seeing all these flying fish, it’s clear that “show” hasn’t happened just a few times.”

In response, Olive Holiday’s smile slowly grew with a sense of intimidation that seemed like it could push someone back despite the fact that she was in a swimsuit and had no weapon.

“Let’s talk about a hypothetical girl who was in a situation similar to yours.”

“I’d rather not,” said Mikoto calmly.

“Don’t take me lightly, you fucking brat.”

The instant the official said that, the killer intent-filled air got two or three times colder. She did not allow someone else to send killer intent back at her evenly. She only allowed for her to crush her opponent from above. A dark and wet hostility filled with that intention hung in the air.

“Why do you think I spoke to you from this position? I have nothing hidden on my body, the nearest exit I could escape through is far off, and I am right in the middle of this large area. Why do you think I am facing you here?”

Olive Holiday smiled.

As she smiled, her slender hand slowly moved bringing her index finger to her mouth.

It was as if she were purposefully taking her hand away from her lifejacket.

“The reason is that this location, this distance, and this timing are all within my needs for an ensured victory. I have no need to defend and no need to flee. … This is our stronghold. I could get anything I needed here and yet I stand here alone. That means that I already possess everything I need to control this location.”

She was exactly like the official who would lead a child who had gotten lost in the facility.

Except, she would lead them to an attraction that was a battlefield covered in fresh blood and death.

“…A word of warning. You should stop for your own sake,” Mikoto said.

“I have seen the data on the destruction of the Mixcoatl.” As if to demonstrate her control of the situation, Olive took a step forward. “And I still deem my victory ensured despite what it told me. You really need to realize that you two are no longer guests. You are nothing more than foreign enemies.”

Mikoto and Olive silently glared at each other.

Mikoto heard no noise from behind her. Saten may have stopped breathing.

(What’s she going to do…?)

Would a projectile fire from the lifejacket? Or would she charge in at high speed? Or was she hiding a secret weapon somewhere other than the lifejacket like her hair or her ear?

(How should I move…?)

There was no one move that would work on all situations. Every attack had its strengths and weaknesses. In other words, there was a risk of being wounded if she misread what her enemy intended to do.

Killer intent clashed with killer intent.

All sound disappeared.

And then…

A small electronic beep was heard.

“…What is it?” Olive asked.

Her index finger was still on her lips and her gaze was still on Mikoto, but she was speaking to someone else.

The response came from the small radio strapped on like a knife near the shoulder of the lifejacket.

“Leader, the directors in management have completed their negotiation.”

“What’s the plan?”

“Do not touch Academy City’s #3, Railgun. If a Level 5 class person were to be treated as having gone missing, Japan’s Academy City would determine that there was a danger that the important military secrets included in her DNA map had been leaked. There would be a risk of a multi-sided war on technological, economical, intelligence, and military fronts.”

“The world police decided that? I’m shocked.”

“Indeed,” came the immediate response over the radio. “Should we just ignore it?”

“Good question,” Olive said with a laugh.

Mikoto put herself on guard and bluish-white sparks flew from her bangs.

“Let’s not. We could deal with this independently, but the cost would be too great. The losses would be greater than the gains, so there is no reason to expend the effort. It doesn’t have enough value to incite the wrath of management.”

“Then we’ll go with that.”

“Yes. Leave the *escorting of our guests* to me.”

With a slight bit of static, the transmission cut off.

The killer intent being emitted from Olive disappeared, her shoulders relaxed, and she put on the traditional smile of the service industry.

“And that seems to be how this will go,” she said to Mikoto.

“…What do you mean?”

“I am saying that I will let you go. If you insist on fighting, I will of course do my best to satisfy you as you our guest. In that case, I would ensure that we fought until one of us was dead. Even if both of you fought me together, I’m sure it would not take even a minute.”

Olive’s overly polite speech seemed to be slightly sarcastic and it may have been expressing how angry she was. It was the kind of anger a child had when someone else splashed them.

“And what if we tell others about what happened here?”

“We have plenty of information experts. Have you forgotten that our country has the world’s largest intelligence agency? Anything you do in that regard will not leave Liberal Arts City, but if you still want to, feel free. We wholeheartedly want to give you the greatest hospitality we can. The gap between a professional and an amateur is clear and I’m sure I don’t have to tell you which one would win.”

Mikoto suddenly exhaled upon realizing Olive was telling the truth and not just being unwilling to admit defeat. If they had a standardized way of dealing with that kind of thing, then it also meant that they might not end up assassinating Mikoto and Saten.

(They’re letting go someone who has seen a portion of their secret. Normally that would be an unthinkable option, but they must some kind of foundation they’re basing that decision on.)

Of course, there was still a risk of everything that official saying being a lie and that they would end up being attacked in their hotel rooms that night.

(Either way, she is not the only issue. Getting held up here won’t help anything. Defeating her might even make them get more serious which would cause even more problems. …I’d like more information before I make my move.)

“I’ll take you up on your offer.”

“Heh heh. An excellent choice,” said Olive as she smiled. “Now, let me show you two guests to the exit.”

“…Are you serious?” Mikoto said as she realized Saten was utterly frightened behind her. “You want us to walk through some unknown facility following someone who could stab us in the back at any moment?”

“Do not be mistaken. I am nothing more than an official of this institution. I am only allowed to take action in order to physically enforce the rules of Liberal Arts City.”

Olive took a step to the side and held her hand out horizontally as if showing the way. The gesture seemed to be one of regulating the confused flow.

“As such, as long as you follow my warnings and do not take any unnecessary actions, we officials will do our best to give you an enjoyable stay."

With a smile that made Mikoto shudder, the supple official began escorting them.

Uiharu Kazari had been a bit hungry before she went to bed, so she had used her cell phone translation application to speak with a tall waiter in the hotel lounge.

"Excuse me…My order…um…I want to eat…black tea and…a sandwich."

Defying her expectations, a large plate covered in a large number of sandwiches was brought to her. As she was staring blankly at them…

"Uiharu! Uiharu!! Uuuuiiihaaaarrrruuuu!!"

"S-Saten-san!? Waah! Perfect timing. Please help me do something about this mountain of sandwiches! There's no way I can eat all of them myself!!"

"That doesn't matter right now!! It was amazing!! If I told you some things, I think my head might end up rolling on the floor, so I can't explain, but it was all amazing!!"

"What are talking abou—? Wah wah wah! Don't start a focused attack on the healthy vegetable sandwiches!! Be more varied! Don't leave just the juicy chicken sandwiches to me!!"

Saten's mouth was stuffed so full of sandwiches she could not reply.

She merely tilted her head questioningly toward Uiharu.

Despite those girls in their swimsuits creating an uproar between themselves, the quiet Liberal Arts City night continued.

Chapter 3

Dawn came and the brilliant white midsummer sun once again rose into the blue sky.

Seeing the sunbeams falling down, it almost made one forget that it was actually September.

Uiharu Kazari was looking up at the explosively shining sun while wearing a pink one piece swimsuit with a floral print.

“Hey, Uiharu. Quit fading away over there and get over here, you midsummer girl.”

“Saten-san. Don’t call me a midsummer girl. And what does that mean anyway?”

Uiharu looked over and saw Saten Ruiko approaching and seemingly irritated about something.

“Hm. It looks like you got a nice suntan from playing outside all day yesterday. Let’s see. Let me see the before and after of your tan.”

“Wait, ah!? Please don’t pull on the strap of my swimsuit!! Is that what you meant by a midsummer girl?!”

Uiharu protested, but Saten stretched out her swimsuit and stared at the line between milky white and light brown.

“My hair is long, so if I just stand there, I have parts that don’t get tanned. That’s why I used a strong sunblock, but I think it was too strong. I’m completely white. That’s pretty boring, so I wonder what I’ll do today. Maybe I should put my hair up so I can get a good tan.”

“W-wait! Don’t peel the brown parts! Th-that’s disgusting! You’re going to make it look terrible in the end, Saten-san!!”

“Don’t worry! You can play a lot today so it will tan up again!! Ga ha ha!”

That was when Mikoto arrived. They had eaten breakfast together, but they had split up to head back to the hotel before meeting up on the beach again.

“Hey. Sorry it took so long.”

“Oh, we don’t mind…Huh? Shirai-san isn’t with you?”

“That’s what took so long. Her sexy swimsuits were simply too destructive, so I had to go through all of her luggage to see if she had a swimsuit that was at least a little better. And I finally found one. It was a completely normal swimsuit.”

“S-so…?”

“So I’m here to introduce her reincarnation with this simple swimsuit!!”

Mikoto swung her arm over pointing in an odd direction. Standing there was Shirai Kuroko with a bored expression on her face. The swimsuit she was wearing was no more revealing than a school swimsuit. It was a white-ish one piece. It had a few straight lines on it and it was much more normal than her ridiculous swimsuit from the day before that had been nothing but a few lines.

But Uiharu and Saten were taken aback.

They looked like they were about to vomit.

“I-it doesn’t suit her at all!! Wh-why does it seem so off for Shirai-san to be wearing a normal swimsuit!?”

“How unfashionable can you get!? That looks like it would be in a cheap grab bag in a shopping district!”

Shirai Kuroko, the Japanese samurai, seemed to have become rather famous because even the surrounding (male) foreigners were making a disappointed commotion.

“Oh, it’s something simple today.”

“You idiot. That’s normal.”

“The Japanese bushido certainly is dreadful to have grabbed our interest like that.”

Shirai gnashed her teeth.

“Th-this is why I didn’t want to wear something like this!! And if wearing something like this disappoints everyone, then I should have just worn a showier swimsuit!”

Steam seemed to be coming from Shirai’s head as she yelled, but Mikoto had a triumphant smile and Uiharu and Saten drew back. Shirai Kuroko finally ran out of patience and reached out for her ultimate weapon.

“Here we go!! Secret switch activated!!”

“Wha-!?”

“D-don’t tell me this is the ultimate sexy swimsuit that can transform and combine!? …Huh?”

The three of them put themselves on guard, but the swimsuit did not come apart revealing skin.

The white swimsuit seemed to be made of an outer cloth and an inner cloth. By using the intentional notches in the outer cloth, the blue color of the inner cloth made patterns on the white swimsuit.

Immediately afterwards…

“U-ugh!?”

“Wha-? …Eh? ...Wait! Th-this is..!!”

“I don’t understand why, but Shirai-san looks incredibly sexy!”

Mikoto, Uiharu, and Saten’s faces suddenly turned red. Shirai’s swimsuit was still the unfashionable one piece type that anyone from a young child to an old woman could wear. It truly was an extremely unfashionable white piece of clothing that was disappointing in how revealing it was.

And yet…

“Heh. This is your fault, onee-sama. I did not want to use this ultimate weapon, but you forced me to wear it today.”

“Gh…Gfh….What is that mysterious swimsuit…?”

“It is a collection of the best of Academy City’s technology. It was designed with the courtship displays of 38,000 animals in mind. Everything that living beings find to be sexy was gathered together so that it has sex appeal that will not only arouse men and women both young and old, but it will also arouse every kind of animal!!”

“Wait, aren’t the showier courtship displays usually done by the males…?”

“Complaint sealing courtship bomber!!”

“Mgyaaaaaaaahhhhh!?” Mikoto screamed upon seeing the courtship swimsuit.

She tried to overcome its effects, but it seemed Shirai’s swimsuit used more than the visual effects from the lines. It had small speakers installed inside and even had (electronically disseminated) pheromone scents woven into the fabric. That terrible swimsuit attacked via each of the five senses. Most likely, it would have a courtship flavor if you licked it and a courtship feeling if you touched it. In fact, with such a strange piece of technology, it may have even entered the realm of sixth sense courtship.

Which meant…

“Ahah…I’m the one wearing it, and even I’m feeling a little woozy…”

“Gwaah!! The idiot at the center of it all is receiving the most damage!? H-hey, Kuroko! At least tell us where the off switch is before you collapse!! Are you trying to turn this entire beach into an indiscriminate storm of courtship!?”

Mikoto’s vision was getting a bit distorted and it was all tinted a pale pink like she was seeing some kind of illusion. If something wasn’t done about that tactical courtship bomb, it could easily end up being reported on the news as a joke story.

“O-Onee-sama…”

“What, Kuroko!? J-just tell me where the switch is! If we don’t get that thing off soon, I’m going to make it stop even if I have to rip it apart!!”

“…Eh heh.”

“W-wait, why are you smiling? Why are you pulling your lips back and staying so silent!? Just hurry!! You can wear that sexy swimsuit from yesterday or whatever, just get rid of that new generation high-tech weapon!!”

In the end, Shirai had remained limp and silent, so Mikoto had searched about her swimsuit until she finally found the off switch.

Saten sighed heavily on the beach.

(Shirai-san certainly looked happy…)

Saten recalled Shirai Kuroko’s expression when she had been kicked in the back and sent back to the hotel. That futuristic swimsuit’s effects should have been gone, but an odd disturbance remained in Saten’s head.

“Uiharu, I’m a bit thirsty, so I’m going to go buy a drink.”

“O-okay. I was just about to go rest, so I’ll be lying over there getting a tan.”

After hearing Uiharu’s exhausted response, Saten walked from the artificial beach to a narrow promenade made of bricks.

(But…)

Saten thought to herself as she walked along.

(What was that yesterday?)

Saten may have usually seemed rather thoughtless (and she basically was), but that did not mean that she never thought about anything. There had been that hangar-like area in the center of Liberal Arts City and the destroyed flying fish-like crafts. And there had been the conversation between Mikoto and the official named Olive. It seemed something had been settled between them, but Saten had been left out. She had no idea what had happened and she could not relax until she did.

(On the way back to the hotel, Misaka-san said thoughtlessly getting into a dispute would draw unwanted attention from the teachers and might cause problems for the other students. She also said causing trouble could ruin the entire trip, so I shouldn't make too much of an uproar over it…but why did she go in there in the first place?)

Truth be told, she had not slept well the night before. It may sound stupid, but she had felt like her window could shatter at any time and a special forces-like group would swing in on ropes like in a movie.

But nothing had happened.

The sky and the sea were blue and Saten Ruiko was in her swimsuit as usual.

(Misaka-san seems to be silently observing things…and I know someone like me can't accomplish anything by worrying about it, but…)

She sighed and pushed her worries away to a corner of her mind.

The scenery of the area she was in seemed to be modeled off of Hawaii or Guam because the gently curving promenade next to the beach was lined with palm trees. After walking a bit further, she came across a stand selling drinks made by sticking fruits and milk into the juicer right there. The stand was really just a remodeled RV, but the undercarriage was thicker like an off-road vehicle perhaps so it could drive on the beach.

Saten looked over the menu that was written in English, Japanese, and Chinese.

(I guess the basic is a combination of banana and milk. Oh, but vanilla is something else entirely. Hmm? They have coconut. I'm pretty sure I've had a coconut soda before, but I wonder what a real fresh coconut tastes like…Wait!? They're selling coconut milk like it's nothing!!)

The shop was selling various nostalgic things, but Saten chose the coconut drink for the roundabout reason of it seeming “tropical”. She used the IC card around her neck to pay for it and took her cup from a man with very wild arm hair.

(Now then, time to see what real coconut tastes like.)

As she walked along the path leading back to where Uiharu was, she mixed the contents of the cup with the straw.

Suddenly, she heard a nearby thicket rustling. The thicket was made up of shorter trees planted behind the palm trees lined up along the promenade. The combination of the path, the palm trees, and the shorter trees was somewhat reminiscent of a Baumkuchen. The thicket was something like a green afro on the ground and it was rustling and moving in front of Saten’s eyes.

Generally, there were two different types of reactions people had upon seeing something strange.

Some would raise their guard and move back and some would be interested and move forward.

Saten Ruiko was most certainly the latter type.

(Wh-what? What what what what is this?)

She strayed from the promenade and pushed aside the giant afro thicket.

Immediately afterwards, two brown arms stuck out of the afro. Before Saten could react, the arms grabbed her arm and her waist and pulled her into the afro.

“Dwaaaaaaaaahh!? Dammit, my drink!! I still don’t know what fresh coconut tastes like!!”

The instant she lost her balance and tripped, the contents of her cup spilled onto the sand. After seeing the coconut drink being absorbed by the earth, Saten glared at the one who had done it.

But she did not complain any further.

The owner of the brown arms used some strange kind of throw to hurl Saten further. Saten now lay on her back on the sand with the brown person on top of her. The person’s thighs were used to keep Saten from moving her arms and a brown arm was used to seal Saten’s mouth.

“Mgh!?”

“…You’re not an official. Tch. I got a simple tourist involved. I was hoping to beat one of them up and steal their clothes…”

Those words were spoken in some foreign language by a girl who looked to be around high school age. Her shoulder-length black hair was wavy and her eyes were piercingly black. The sunlight seemed to emphasize the tight lines of her brown skin.

The brown girl kept her hand over Saten’s mouth and then spoke in Japanese.

“If you yell, I’ll kill you.”

Saten Ruiko’s response upon hearing that was quite simple.

She used her small mouth to bite the brown hand over her mouth.

“Gwoh!?”

The brown girl yelled in a decidedly unfeminine manner and she removed her hand from Saten’s mouth due to the pain. At the same time, Saten opened her mouth wide.

“S-someone help! I’m being mugged! Ah, how do you say it in English!? U-um…Help!! Pinch!! I’m in a pinch here!!”

“Hey, I said I’d kill you if you yelled, didn’t I!? Dammit…just shut your mou—ow!! Don’t bite me! Don’t bite me, you stupid bitch!!”

The brown girl looked around the area as she desperately tried to cover up Saten’s mouth again. When she did, that mouth closed on her hand like a bear trap. After being bit two or three times, it must have pissed her off because she grabbed some white sand and thrust it into Saten’s mouth.

“Mghgmghgh!?”

"…I-if you don't shut up, I'll show you just how full your mouth can get."

Saten finally quieted down.

She coughed up the sand, but the brown girl did not get off of her.

"Ueh. Cough. Wh-what was that for…?"

The brown girl's thighs finally loosened up just a bit and Saten looked up dumbfounded.

"Yesterday, a Mixcoatl crashed here."

"?"

"That is the name of our vehicles that were fighting with the scientific airplanes. One of them crashed on the beach yesterday, right? I came here to rescue my comrade who was aboard, but I had to lend my one-man reconnaissance model to the injured pilot, so now I can't get away," the brown girl said in a fairly sulky and desperate way.

She turned her head aside and the feathered decoration in her ear lightly waved.

(I didn't understand any of that…)

Saten had no idea what was going on, but she had no choice but to continue looking up at the girl who was sitting atop her.

Liberal Arts City was a ridiculous place where everyone wore their swimsuits everywhere, but even there, that brown girl's outfit stood out. However, that was not because it was exceedingly revealing like Shirai Kuroko's swimsuit.

She was wearing some sort of Indian or tribal sort of outfit. It was not made of the shiny materials common in costumes. Instead, it was faded and stained like it had been worn for a long time.

Swimsuits tended to be made of synthetic fibers which gave them a scientific taste. The brown girl's tribal outfit stood out amid that.

"…Damn, I guess I have to change my plan. Hey, I'm gonna make use of you," the brown girl said while looking down at Saten. “Walking around in the open dressed like this will just bring the annoying officials to me, so I need a swimsuit like the one you’re wearing so I can hide among the crowds.”

“Why me…?”

“I could always just steal what you’re wearing now. It may be simpler to just kill you,” the brown girl said bluntly.

Saten could not tell how serious the girl was being.

“I don’t want to kill a civilian if I don’t have to, but if you refuse to help, if you say you’re going to buy me a swimsuit and just run off, or you go running to the officials…Well, let’s just say you should just do what I say.”

“Boo.”

Saten literally booed, but then she felt something cold pressed against her throat.

The brown girl had stretched out her arm. She was holding something, but Saten could not see what it was because it was pressed against her throat.

“An obsidian knife may be a rare sight for you, but it can peel off skin, remove organs, and scrape the muscles and fat off of bones. This knife was originally made to use on human flesh.”

“…Really?”

“If you don’t want me to use it, listen to what I have to say. This is not made to sever without giving any pain. If it cuts your flesh, it will hurt. Do you understand?”

Saten nodded quickly.

Seeing that, the brown girl finally moved off of Saten.

Saten brushed the sand off of her back and butt while she grumbled in her heart.

“Dammit… Fine, I just have to buy you a swimsuit, right? So what are your measurements?”

“84, 58, 81.”

(Damn. I lose on all counts.)

“What’s with those glazed eyes? I don’t care about the color, but get something that’s easy to move in.”

“Okay, okay.”

Saten pushed aside the afro-like thicket and started to head back toward the promenade.

“Oh, right. What’s your name?”

“Xochitl.”

“Hmm,” was Saten’s arbitrary response.

(Hm? If she needs a swimsuit for camouflage so she isn’t found by the Liberal Arts City officials…then she can’t walk out in the open, right?)

“Gwoohh!! I’m outta here! I’ve gotta make a dash for the safe zone…Gyh!?”

“I thought you’d do that, you idiot!!”

The brown girl stretched out her arms again and pulled Saten Ruiko back into the afro.

Xochitl spoke with her head hanging down and a dark smile on her face.

“…You seem to be mistaken about something. Having the swimsuit does nothing more than make it *easier* for me to blend in with the crowd. If I wanted to, I could secretly move from cover to cover and chase you down. I would just prefer a safer plan that is a little less risky.”

“Fwa ha ha! Do you really think I’m going to remain silent after hearing something as dangerous as tha—fgh!?”

Saten’s words were cut off because Xochitl had pulled something from her pocket and shoved it up Saten’s nose. An extremely unpleasant sensation moved its way up her nose.

“Gwooohhh!?”

Saten brought her hand up to her face, but the mysterious object had been completely embedded in her nose. She rubbed at the bottom of her nose, but could not feel anything there. It seemed it would be difficult to get whatever it was out.

“What the hell are you doing to a maiden’s nose!? And what was that!?”

“You want to know? It was one of these.”

In Xochitl’s hand was an odd rod that looked something like half a Q-tip. She then pressed a sort of button in her other hand. With a slight sound, small thorns emerged from the end and the entire rod started vibrating like an electric toothbrush.

“It isn’t what they’re made for, but they’ve become popular tools of torture in recent times. The mucous membrane in the nose is sensitive. Having it scraped off is rather painful.”

“…”

Saten’s face paled.

“It would be rather bad for you if it was activated while it’s still in your nose. If you don’t want that to happen, then go buy me a swimsuit. Oh, and don’t recklessly try to pull it out. It's remote controlled, so I can activate it at any time.”

And so Saten Ruiko ended up running an errand for someone in a distant foreign country.

She came to a large shopping mall in Liberal Arts City and had no motivation other than to just buy some cheap swimsuit and head back so as not to make the other girl mad.

“What are you doing looking through the swimsuits?”

"Hm? Oh, it's the suspicious-looking film director," was Saten's arbitrary response to Beverly Seethrough whose breasts were as huge as ever.

Saten may have been the type who gets onboard each new big thing, but she had no interest when it was in a genre she did not care for.

Beverly stared at Saten's red bikini.

"Have you gotten tired of the one you're wearing?"

"Umm…no."

If she actually explained what was going on, something bad would probably happen, so she had no choice but to evade the question.

"A friend of mine had her swimsuit's strap break, so I was sent out on an emergency mission. She's trembling in a thicket even now."

"Oh, poor thing."

"Oh, don't feel sorry for her. She's about as arrogant as you can get. I was thinking of getting revenge by choosing some terrible swimsuit that was so showy it would make her cry."

"Hmm. How about this one?"

"No, that's not nearly enough. I want something at least this bad."

"No, no, what about this one?"

"No, no, no, this one has the destructive power I'm looking for, so…"

The organization Xochitl belonged to was created by gathering people from Central and South America and gathering techniques that were different from the existing scientific technology. That organization had been continually fighting with Liberal Arts City for years.

That brown girl who was all alone in the middle of enemy lines may have been hiding like a beast within the thicket, but she was actually feeling rather depressed.

It wasn’t that she could not take a step out of that afro-like thicket. She had actually been moving about slipping through gaps in the security since the day before. But moving around while having to cautiously pay attention to her surroundings like that had worn her down mentally. That was why she felt that stealing an official’s outfit or getting a swimsuit so she could mix in with the crowds would be much easier.

(…But I’m still in the middle of enemy territory. I guess things won’t go that easily.)

She had no idea when her comrades would come to help her, she would clearly be outnumbered if the officials found her, and despite her threats, she could not really do anything if that girl she had sent for a swimsuit actually ran away. Even if she did get revenge on the girl with the remote control, it would just mean mutual destruction.

And on top of all that, Xochitl had become fairly injured in the process of hiding herself and she had eaten practically nothing for an entire day.

Xochitl checked on her weapons while in that isolated state.

However, she barely had any weapons.

She was not trained for battle. Her role was to recover the pilots from the Mixcoatls that crashed or became otherwise unusable.

She had ended up there because the pilot who had escaped from the Mixcoatl that had crashed on the Liberal Arts City beach the day before had sent out a distress signal.

Xochitl had been flying a one-man reconnaissance craft. She was supposed to have only confirmed the location of the injured pilot and then sent that information to the rescuers, but the pilot had been too greatly injured. It had been necessary to take him back to their base as quickly as possible. Xochitl had let him use the tiny one-man craft meant to be used for reconnaissance which left Xochitl as the one needing rescue.

“…”

Xochitl looked down at her knife made of obsidian and sighed. If it came down to fighting the officials, she needed to be prepared, but just as she was about to focus on that…

“Hey, have you been waiting, little kitty? Saten-san is back with a swimsuit for yo—gfh!?”

The idiot was back, so Xochitl covered her mouth and pulled her into the thicket.

Xochitl pulled a plastic bag from Saten’s hand. Annoyingly enough, it had the Liberal Arts City’s logo on it.

Saten made a pouting expression with her lips.

“C’mon, you don’t have to be so arrogant.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, and could you take that thing out of my nose?”

“…Okay, fine.”

Xochitl muttered something under her breath and Saten frantically reached up to her nose. She most likely thought she had a runny nose, but it was the thin rod that came out.

“I’ll be changing, so get out,” Xochitl said sounding annoyed.

“Okay, okay. Heh heh heh.”

“What? Why are you laughing?”

“No reason, no reason. Geh heh heh.”

Xochitl stared at Saten oddly as the girl headed from the thicket back to the promenade. Xochitl finally opened the plastic bag with the swimsuit in it and stuck her hand inside.

And then…

“Are you done?” Saten Ruiko shouted in a carefree voice toward the green afro-like thicket.

No response came, but the entire thicket shook as if to indicate the trembling of Xochitl’s body.

Saten ignored that and asked again.

“Are you done? If you don’t come out, I’m heading back in there.”

“What…?” said a voice from within the thicket.

“Hanyah?” Saten said purposefully tilting her head to the side as she pretended to be confused.

“What the hell is thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssssssssssss!?”

Two arms shot from the green afro and Saten was swallowed up by the thicket as if it were a ridiculously huge sea anemone from a tropical ocean.

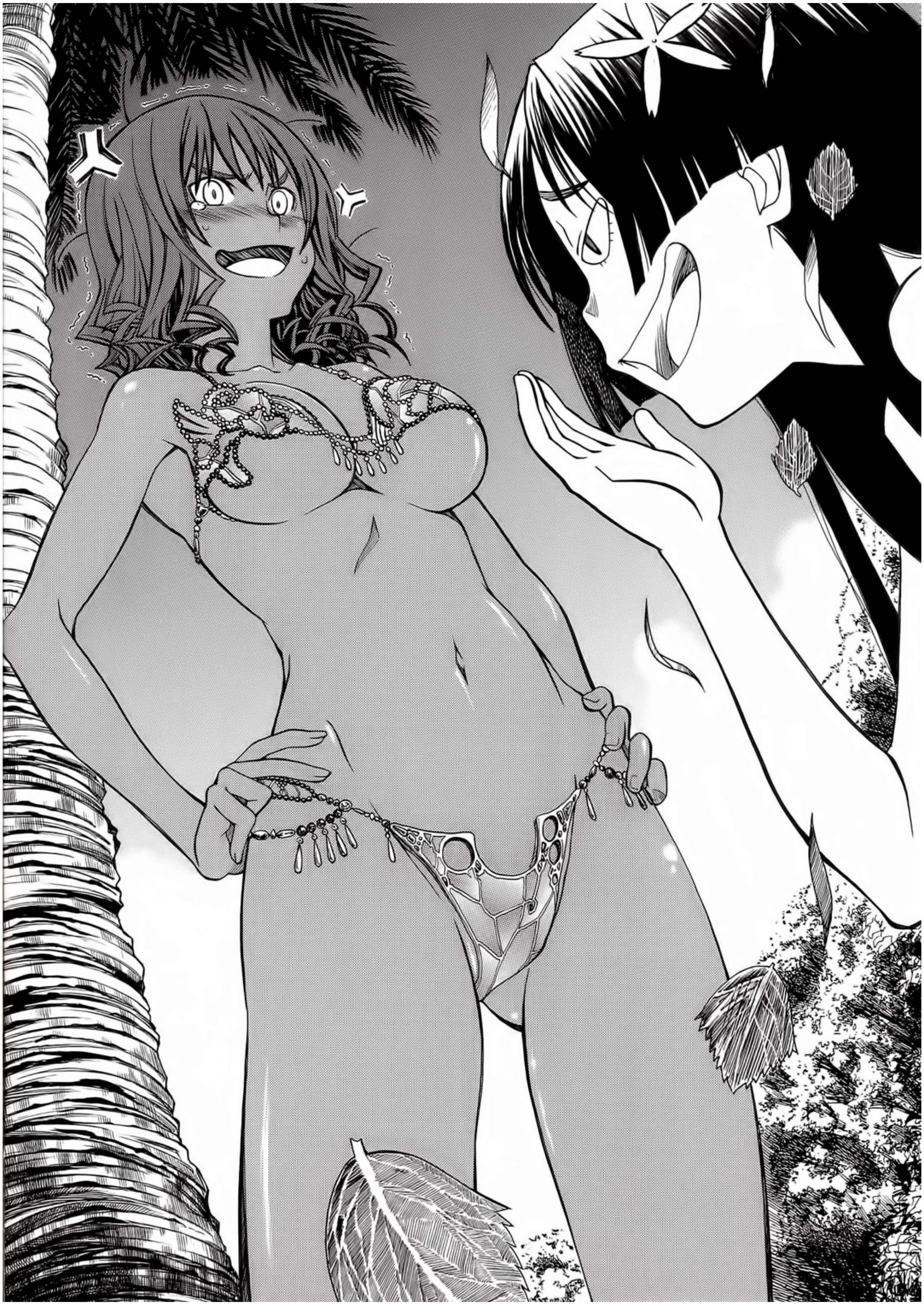
Saten was annoyed at how much the branches and leaves scraped against her and Xochitl was standing dauntingly on the other side of the thicket.

Seeing her, Saten Ruiko couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ahh…You really put on that sexy swimsuit…”

“How can you say that when you’re the one that bought it!? What! The! Hell! Is! This!? How stupid can you get!? Were you not embarrassed to take this up to the register!?”

What Xochitl was wearing was what would commonly be referred to as a bikini.



However, all of the narrow strings were covered in beads of various colors as if they were rosaries and the actual cloth was made of sparkling lamé. The cup portions covering the breasts were not made of cloth. They were made of spirals of strings with red, blue, and yellow beads that just barely covered up what needed to be covered up. This left the bottom of Xochitl's breasts almost completely bare.

Saten put a hand to her mouth and a smile spread across her face.

"Heh heh. That's called a jewelry bikini. You have much to learn, Xochitl-kun. Don't you look a lot like a samba dancer!?"

"Th-this is…This is no time for joking around!!"

"Oh, watch out. If you move too much, something might pop out. Unlike my zip-up bikini, that isn't made to stick to your skin, so you might end up putting certain things on full display. …And don't try to go swimming. The resistance of the water would strip it all off."

"Do you not see a problem with a swimsuit that can't be used to swim in!?"

Due to both anger and embarrassment, Xochitl's face was red and she was breathing erratically. It seemed she wanted to attack Saten right then and there but she could not do so because she was afraid the jewelry bikini would catch on something.

Xochitl finally realized she was at the disadvantage, so she gave up on heading over to punch Saten.

"…Hey, come with me."

"Eh? I already bought you the swimsuit."

"If you don't, I'm prepared to take you down with me by ripping off your swimsuit. …Do you want both of us to be naked?"

Saten Ruiko was not able make a careless bet on whether Xochitl was bluffing and she would rather not have that strange rod stuck up her nose again.

And so Saten Ruiko ended up walking around Liberal Arts City with the mysterious brown girl named Xochitl. Xochitl did not want to go shopping somewhere or to ride on a roller coaster or anything. She was not walking around heading for a destination like that.

As she walked by a beach and a shopping mall, Xochitl gritted her teeth.

“(…Dammit. I want to take out at least one facility, but I can’t get a chance to do anything like that when I stand out this much!!)”

Probably due to her showy swimsuit, everyone’s gaze gathered on her wherever she went. The colorful beads glittered in the sun and living beings tended to turn their gaze toward shiny things, so all the men’s gazes were naturally drawn in toward the bikini covering her breasts and waist. Drops of sweat appeared on her skin due to the heat and her embarrassment. They also glittered, but in a much healthier and more lascivious way than with the beads.

“(…W-well, I have more than one goal. If I can’t destroy anything, I just have to put my focus on something else. Maybe I should try to get some more complete information on the enemy. If I don’t get at least something, this will have been such a waste that I’ll might feel like killing myself.)”

“What are you muttering about?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking that I might need to change my face if it comes down to it.”

“?”

Saten put on a puzzled expression but did not ask any more as she walked along.

She was being dragged along without knowing where they were headed. Her amateur thoughts led her to assume Xochitl was walking around with her because she would stand out less as she looked around if she had someone with her.

But…

(Oh, no. I chose an extremely showy swimsuit for her and I’m betting the officials have me marked after that incident yesterday.)

An unpleasant sweat started pouring form Saten, but Xochitl did not seem to notice.

After walking through an area made up of a couple of artificial islands created by artificial canals, Xochitl suddenly put her hands on her small waist and sighed slightly.

After walking all over the place, they had ended up near the shopping mall where Saten had bought the jewelry bikini.

“…Well, I guess that’s pretty much it.”

“What is?”

“The traces of underground facilities cannot be completely erased. The general size of a facility can be deduced from the number and locations of the ducts. …And so many of my comrades have been injured for the sake of those ridiculous underground areas.”

“…Underground facilities?”

“Basically, they need facilities prepared in order to fill in the discrepancies between a real battle and a show and they have all sorts of different kinds of ammunition stored up.” Xochitl seemed annoyed. “But the main facility for analysis and research doesn’t seem to be here. I guess the rocket launch pad in the center of the city is the most likely place. …Hmph. This artificial island was created by piling sand and manmade objects on top of the rocks that jutted up from the bottom of the ocean to only about 20 meters from the surface. In that case, they wouldn’t have the proper depth needed for a shelter. …Yes. If they dug too deep, they would open up a hole in the supporting rocks which would weaken them and could possibly cause the entire city to start to tilt.”

“???”

“Underground shelters are strong, but only if they are deep enough. If they aren’t there is a great risk of a cave in from the shock of an attack even if the shelter itself is not hit. And this country’s bunker busters are said to be able to blow up bases 20 or 30 meters below the surface. In that case, it would indeed be safer to not build their most important facility underground.”

“Xochitl, what are you going on about…?”

“Don’t ask. It’s better if you don’t know.”

At that time, Saten Ruiko saw multiple white contrails cutting through the blue sky above. It was the Laveze Squadron from Alien Wars doing an acrobatic show. Saten let out a stupid voice as she watched the multiple jets fly straight from the land out to the ocean.

“Wow. They’re doing that battle show today, too!”

The two of them were standing in an inland area a bit away from the beach. Even so, there was only white sand beneath their feet. The bricks of the promenade and the roads as well as the buildings such as the shopping mall and the hotel were all built atop the sand.

The blue ocean could be seen in the distance between two buildings.

Finally, Xochitl muttered something.

“So they’re finally here.”

“?”

Saten looked puzzled and then a tremendous explosive noise struck her ears. The noise was louder than one would expect from a show. It was more like an accident had occurred during the aerial acrobatics. Saten covered her hurting ears with her hands and saw some black smoke rising up in the distance seeming to sully the blue sky.

With another explosive noise something fluttered through the sky. Looking up, it looked like a small fragment of something, but it was actually a large fighter over 20 meters long and it came crashing into the beach. The sound of steam came from that fighter that was one of the ships used by the Laveze Squadron. The pilot must have ejected because the glass canopy covering the cockpit was gone.

“Wha—Eh…Th-this is…?”

Saten did not have time to be surprised or to think that it was just a show.

Dozens of white lines cut across the blue sky. They looked similar to the contrails from before, but they were narrower, sharper, and faster. The white points were reminiscent of spears. They stabbed across various parts of Liberal Arts City, mercilessly exploded, destroyed building walls, dug up sand, and generally spread about damage and confusion.

One of those white points landed near Saten and she was knocked down on the hot sand despite not having been directly hit.

Xochitl calmly remained standing.

The girl's expression did not change in the slightest as she slowly looked up into the sky and muttered a few words.

"You certainly took your time."

As if in response, the beach right next to Xochitl exploded as if it were being lifted up from below. It was less like something was breaking out from within the earth and more like something was breaking through the ceiling of an underground facility. What appeared was one of the things that had been fighting the Laveze Squadron the day before. The craft looked like it was made up of a 5 meter long canoe with another one placed on top upside down. A short wing and a long wing were on both sides of the front of the flying fish-like craft.

Xochitl turned toward the flying fish and spoke in a much, much more friendly way than she had toward Saten.

She was speaking in a language Saten did not understand.

"So my survey of the enemy land was a waste, hm? My prediction was that the real analysis and research was not carried out in the facility underneath the attractions but in the rocket launch pad facility at the center of the city."

"You were correct, but the two facilities share a large underground area, so they can travel between them without leaving."

"And so you got in. How did it go?"

"I carried out the minimum amount of destruction needed and I retrieved you know what. But the inside was much more toughly built than I had expected.

Personally, I didn’t like it.”

“Don’t get greedy. You shouldn’t have gone this far inland using a sea battle Mixcoatl in the first place.”

“And who do you think I did that for? I used one of these because you might have had a broken bone making you a complete burden.”

With a sound like a can of something carbonated opening, the upper canoe-like section slid back opening up the craft.

Inside that acutely angled main body was a girl with brown skin just like Xochitl’s. She appeared to be just a bit older than Xochitl. The gap in age was small enough that an adult would probably just refer to them both as kids, but a middle schooler like Saten noticed age differences like that.

It may have had some formal meaning or it may have functioned as a kind of pilot suit, but the girl was wearing the same kind of tribal outfit as Xochitl had when Saten had first met her.

The girl in the canoe looked at Xochitl and then pointed behind her.

“Hurry up and get on. All four wings are almost crushed because I forced it to walk on the land. Just getting back to the ocean will be about the limit.”

Xochitl headed to the canoe as instructed.

“Ah…” said Saten without meaning to upon seeing that receding back.

Even Saten could tell by then that she was not just seeing some kind of show. She had not just seen an explosion; she had gotten caught in the blast. And now Xochitl was headed toward the person who seemed to have caused the explosion.

She wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

Xochitl did not turn back toward Saten.

Xochitl put her small body into the back of the canoe and the upper part slid back to its original place closing up the craft. The flying fish made of wood, cloth, and obsidian vibrated as if it were trembling and used the four wings carefully crushed underneath it to walk away from Saten.

The Mixcoatl made it from the beach to the ocean and then used its wings to float up a few centimeters from the water’s surface allowing it to regain its normal speed.

The girl in front of Xochitl who was controlling the Mixcoatl was named Tochtli. She spoke without turning around.

“Well, it looks like you didn’t get any obvious injuries.”

“I was only unable to contact you. Well, I’m thankful you went out of your way to retrieve me.”

“I’m impressed you managed to wait it out there.”

“The center of the land of the enemy we’ve been fighting for years was as boring as I expected.” Xochitl sighed. “…I’m sure Tecpatl isn’t going to shut up about this once I get back.”

“Well, the higher ups are afraid of losing any of their fighting force, so it’s unlikely you’ll be seriously punished.”

Tochtli did not turn Xochitl’s way, but from the shaking of her shoulders, she seemed to be laughing.

“So you said you managed to retrieve it?”

“Yeah.”

Tochtli nodded without turning around and pointed to the side.

Right next to her was an object about the size of a softball that appeared to have been casually placed there. It was wrapped in a soft cloth like one that would be used to wipe glasses with, so its outer appearance could not be seen.

“I see. So it’s finally returned to our hands,” Xochitl muttered.

"But we won't be able to activate it right away just because we got it back. It seems the assembly and adjustments will take some time. But even so, we've made quite a bit of progress."

"…Xiuhcoatl, hm?" Xochitl muttered.

The inside of the craft fell silent for a short time.

Finally, Tochtli spoke while operating the Mixcoatl.

"That was a nice girl."

"What?"

"That girl was quite nice to help you even though you were about as suspicious as a person can get," Tochtli said completely seriously. "Did you see her face at the end? Her head was full of questions and she wanted to ask you all sorts of things, but she was clearly troubled because she wasn't sure how to ask those questions without hurting you. In the end, she ran out of time and didn't say anything, but she was definitely a nice girl. This city itself may be twisted, but it seems good people do come in from outside. I'll admit that much."

"…"

Xochitl did not respond.

Tochtli did not say anything more and merely piloted the Mixcoatl outside of Liberal Arts City's sphere of control.

Tochtli finally recalled something.

"By the way, Xochitl."

"What?"

"What's with that ridiculous swimsuit? Even if you were trying to mix in with the crowd in enemy territory, wasn't that a bit too risky? Well, I suppose it'll make a nice souvenir for the guys back at the base."

"…I'm reminded of something I said back in Liberal Arts City: I could always just steal what you’re wearing now.”

“…!?”

The sounds of the girls yelling back and forth and enjoyable sounds of destruction resounded within the Mixcoatl.

“Do you really think I’ll let you!?”

“You idiot!”

“Shut up!”

“If you don’t like it, then come up with something better!”

Chapter 4

On the second night, Misaka Mikoto and the others waited until after the roll call with the teachers to head to a restaurant away from the hotel they were staying at.

The restaurants in the hotel were overall of a higher grade, that restaurant had a bit of a messy atmosphere, and it was not all that big, but Mikoto and the others had chosen that place for a simple reason.

A cake buffet was a maiden's battlefield and those middle school girls were the soldiers who would fight on that day.

"Mfmghmgt!! I can finally have complete conquest over the shortcake festival!! Okay! Let's head to the chocolate cake heaven next!!"

"Dahh! Uiharu-san, slow down. And they're bringing in a new shortcake over there."

"Mghh!?"

Uiharu Kazari was attacking all the expensive-looking cakes with showy decorations and Mikoto was swallowing down small fruit desserts. It was a secret that the small fragment-looking fruit desserts were actually worth many times more than the large cakes.

There was one person there who was unable to participate in that maiden battle.

It was the pigtailed Shirai Kuroko in her sexy swimsuit.

"…Ghh…I-I'm going to head over there and eat a safe sandwich or something…"

"Hm? Kuroko, are you still worrying about your diet or whatever?"

“Still!? What do you mean ‘still’, onee-sama!? That sounds like you’re trying to say it’s too late no matter how much effort I put into it!!”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Mikoto stabbed her small spoon into a clear jelly with pieces of dragon fruit inside that were sliced as thinly as flower petals. “We’re eating out for every meal this whole week we’re in Liberal Arts City. Our meals aren’t being regulated like at the dorm, so you’re going to end up eating too much no matter how much you try.”

“Fgyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Shirai the sexy swimsuit let out a scream and all of the customers in the buffet area turned in her direction. It seemed a girl’s scream was recognizable the world over.

However, Shirai paid no heed to the surrounding gazes and started muttering something with her head in her hands. Her thoughts circled around and seemed to have no means of escape, but she finally looked up as if she had realized something.

“Th-that’s right! If I exercise like crazy beforehand, I can lose the amount I would gain and it’ll all cancel out even if I eat a cake!! That’s it!!”

Shirai Kuroko let out an excited shout and then ran out of the buffet area. Uiharu spoke while watching that mostly skin-colored back leave.

“Ahh… Once she leaves the buffet area, she has to pay again to get back in.”

“And if she exercised like crazy and then resisted eating the cakes, wouldn’t she reach her goal a lot faster…?” Mikoto muttered in exasperation, but of course Shirai did not hear her as she was already running as quickly as she could along the nighttime beach.

Uiharu used her fork to cut apart a fancy-looking but actually inexpensive chocolate cake and then ate the pieces, but she finally started speaking.

“I wonder what’s wrong with Saten-san…”

“She said she was worn out from having fun today and then headed back to her hotel room to get some sleep, right?”

“Yeah, but it isn’t like that festive girl to give up so easily…”

She must have been worried about Saten because Uiharu’s expression clouded over a bit.

Mikoto was a little worried about the possibility of the officials having tried something with Saten, but for the time being it seemed the officials were waiting and watching as well.

That may have been because they simply had no intention of killing her or Saten as they had claimed in that area with the destroyed flying fish, or they may have felt that secret was on a level where it would be no real problem even if it could not be immediately passed off as an attraction.

“…But what was that today?” Those words contained feelings of searching and of dissatisfaction. “Even if they are just trying to surprise their guests, that show was rather sudden and it happened all across the city. I know it wouldn’t be as interesting with advance notification, but it looked like they had set explosives in buildings’ walls for the show. I think they should have done more of a safety check for the guests with that. What if someone had gotten hurt?”

“…”

Mikoto was a bit conflicted about how to respond.

Uiharu was speaking of the explosions that had occurred across Liberal Arts City that day. A group of those flying fish-like crafts had come and fired dozens of missiles at Liberal Arts City buildings and attractions. Mikoto also had a feeling that there had been more explosions than just those.

From what she could tell by listening to other tourists, the attractions were periodically changed and altered, but the flying fish “show” had continued to pop up every so often.

Those with sharper intuitions were starting to detect something dangerous, but when they seriously tried to warn others of possible danger, the over 90% of people who were too used to peace would laugh at them and tell them not to get reality and fiction confused. It was all dealt with as a show in the end.

Normally, destruction on that scale would be impossible to hide, but in that movie city, that large scale was the reason people went there in the first place, so people did not see it as out of the ordinary once they noticed it.

Of course, Misaka Mikoto had realized what was going on.

What she was conflicted over was whether to affirm or deny what Uiharu had said.

Liberal Arts City was hiding something.

It was not a mere theme park that brought in customers to make a profit.

There was something about the city that was calling in outside attackers.

But Mikoto could not deny that unnecessarily stirring up Uiharu's unease could end up bringing the girl to an even more dangerous place. From the conversation with the official in the hangar full of broken flying fish the night before, she could imagine just how large a risk that could be.

(Now then…how should I respond to Uiharu?)

Just as Mikoto started to consider her options…

"Onee-samaaan!!" Shirai Kuroko said throwing open the door and making her comeback to the buffet area.

"Uuh!? W-wait a second! You couldn't have worked off a cake's worth of weight in that short amount of time! You're just giving u—!?"

"Free hug!!"

"Gwah!? Don't suddenly hug me like that, you idiot!! H-huh? That's odd… I have a girl in a swimsuit pressing up against me, but all I can feel is skin…"

"A hug is a free way of calming someone's heart. Now, onee-sama, you give me a squeeze!!"

"You utter moron!! This free hug thing is not something a mass of lust like you is supposed to do!!"

Mikoto grabbed the skin-colored shoulder and cheek assaulting her and pushed them away.

The intrusion of that idiot knocked whatever she had been thinking of out of her mind.

“Ha. Ah ha ha…”

Uiharu Kazari subtly took two steps back from the other two and tried to keep her distance so as not to get wrapped up in it as she put a giant Mont Blanc on her plate.

Uiharu suddenly had a thought as she watched the two Tokiwadai Middle School ladies arguing back and forth.

Her expression clouded over a bit as she did.

(Really…I wonder what happened to Saten-san…)

The pale orange light of the floor lamp next to her bed illuminated Saten Ruiko’s cheek. She was lying atop her bed while still wearing her swimsuit. She was not really doing anything; she was just lying there thinking.

She was thinking about what had happened earlier that day.

She was thinking about the exploding buildings and the flying fish-like craft that had appeared from within the ground.

She was thinking about the girl named Xochitl.

(…)

Saten turned over as if she were moving her cloth-wrapped butt to the side.

Her black hair was reflecting the pale light and the hair spread out on the bed as if following her movements.

She did not think what she had seen that day had been some kind of show. She may have been in a theme park that did everything on a large scale and they probably did hold shows that let the tourists join in, but what she had seen was different. After those kinds of shows, she was pretty sure a member of the staff would at least give a word of thanks…and more importantly, Saten had been able to detect the danger despite how dulled she had been by peace. There had been a feeling of discomfort in her temples and her heart had felt tight like someone was squeezing it. It had not been the enjoyable danger that did not leave a set safety zone like with a ghost house or a roller coaster. The true threat of death had approached before her eyes.

And if that was the case…

(What was that show with the Laveze Squadron and the flying fish I saw yesterday with Uiharu and the others?)

She didn't want to think it, but she was suspecting that had not been a scripted performance. Had it actually been a real battle? She wanted to laugh that off as ridiculous, but she had a feeling that the flying fish she had seen the day before and the ones she had seen that day had been the same things.

Saten worked her brain a bit to try to figure it out.

There were those flying fish coming to Liberal Arts City and there was the Laveze Squadron fighting to stop them.

And then there had been the explosions in the buildings before her eyes.

Given just that, it seemed like the flying fish were evil pawns and the fighters in the Laveze Squadron were the heroes of justice protecting everyone from the grasp of evil.

The flying fish were evil.

If that were the case, what about Xochitl who had gotten onto one and left?

"…"

Saten closed her eyes as if to cut off her thoughts.

She had met that girl in about the worst possible way and she had a feeling the girl had even threatened to kill her if she didn't do as she was told. But for some reason, Saten had not felt much real danger behind those words. The explosions caused by the flying fish had been terrifying, but Xochitl's words had seemed panicked and cut off from that kind of direct destruction. It was as if those words had only been on the surface and she was simply asking Saten.

Saten simply could not think of that brown girl as a mere villain.

Saten Ruiko had no ability or experience in peering within people's minds. She merely did not want to think of the girl named Xochitl as a bad person.

"Xochitl…" Saten muttered.

Then she opened her eyes.

She had realized something.

(…Huh? Didn't Misaka-san fight to drive off that flying fish in yesterday's "show"?)

And then there was what had happened the night before.

Mikoto had been wandering around Liberal Arts City and then she and Saten had entered that area filled with destroyed flying fish. Saten had not asked anything at the time, but thinking back, it seemed as if Mikoto had been searching for something.

Of course, an outsider like Mikoto was not a subordinate of Liberal Arts City.

She had no obligation to help them with a mere show and they would not have given her the key to an off limits area.

Which meant…

(Misaka-san knows something.)

As soon as that idea came to her, Saten Ruiko got up from the bed.

It was getting rather late at night, but she did not care.

(I need to ask Misaka-san about Liberal Arts City and those flying fish. And she might know something about Xochitl!!)

She immediately grabbed her cell phone, but Mikoto's may have been turned off because it would not connect. It was also possible that Mikoto was taking a shower or had even gone to sleep already.

Saten felt a bit awkward about it, but she finally decided to head to Mikoto's room to meet her directly. She put the IC card that acted as a wallet around her neck and then opened the door connecting her room to the hallway.

Saten Ruiko's back was swallowed up by the Liberal Arts City night.

She had completely forgotten that she had charged out of her room in a similar fashion the night before and that that had led her to the verge of death.

"We sure ended up eating a lot," Mikoto said while sipping on an iced tea with quite a bit of milk in it.

There were quite a few cafés and restaurants in the hotel they were staying in and Mikoto was currently in a small café with a difficult to find entrance on one end of the third floor. Perhaps to draw in people who had been driven out of other places by the last call, the café stayed open until about 6 in the morning which was rare for something attached to the hotel.

It might have been due to its location or the time and it might have just been the atmosphere the place gave, but the place did not seem to have many customers. However, that was not a bad thing. Mikoto saw it as a point in the place's favor. For some reason, she was fond of places like that where you could easily lose track of the time if you did not look at the hands of the clock.

Uiharu looked around while holding a cup filled with cold cocoa.

"Fweh… Misaka-san, Shirai-san, this is your first time in Liberal Arts City, right? How did you find a place like this so quickly?”

“Well, there are a few common points in useful cafés like this. You don’t have to try every piece of food in the entire world to get an idea if you’ll like something, right? Once you have enough experience, you can get an idea of how a place ranks without even stepping inside,” explained Shirai.

“And if the place ends up defying your expectations, you get even more experience points which is fun.”

Shirai and Mikoto gave their explanations as if it should be obvious, but Uiharu could only give idiotic-sounding noises of admiration. She had been staring blankly at the superior skill of those ladies ever since they referred to it as a “useful café” instead of a “delicious café”.

“We spent yesterday and today playing on the beach, so how about we head to the inland mechanical area with the roller coasters tomorrow?”

“They look interesting, but I don’t like the lines. If someone tells me to wait for two hours under the hot sun, I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it.”

“…Actually, Kuroko, wouldn’t your swimsuit be completely blown away in the wind if you got on a roller coaster?”

Mikoto trembled as she imagined that terrifying scene.

Uiharu sighed.

“Saten-san said she went to bed early because she was worn out, but she’s usually so festive. I wonder if her body couldn’t keep up with the time difference. I hope she’s back to her usual self tomorrow.”

“Come to think of it, what did she do about dinner? Maybe she just got room service.”

“Well, I don’t know if anything happened, but as long as she isn’t hurt or sick, do we really need to worry too much? If it is the time difference, there’s nothing for her to do but to rest,” said Shirai.

“Hmm… I wonder if she’s okay…” said Uiharu with a puzzled expression.

The girls continued talking while enjoying the atmosphere of that hidden café.

“Huh? Maybe she isn’t back yet… Misaka-san. Hey, Misaka-san!”

Saten Ruiko lightly knocked on the door to a hotel room. Unlike with an apartment or a dorm room, there was no intercom and just knocking might not reach someone if they were showering or sleeping.

On the other hand, she couldn’t just shout Mikoto’s name that late at night. A uniform light illuminated the hallway and the lack of people made the area seem rather dreary.

(What should I do…?)

She thought of heading back to her own room and calling Mikoto’s room with the room phone, but Saten just had a feeling that Mikoto was not in her room.

And then…

“Hm? What are you doing here?”

“!?”

Saten jumped at having someone suddenly speak to her from behind.

When she turned around, she saw the blonde-haired, huge-breasted genius girl film director Beverly Seethrough. She was looking at Saten with a puzzled expression.

“Don’t tell me you…”

“Wh-what?”

“Did you leave your key in your room and get locked out? If so, you should just give up and head to the front desk.”

“I didn’t do anything embarrassing like that,” said Saten while feeling utterly exhausted. “I came looking for someone I know, but she seems to either be asleep or out.”

“Looking for someone, hm?” Beverly looked down at her cell phone to check the time. “…Are you jetlagged? I’d say that’s a rather uninteresting turn of events, too.”

“Actually, what are you doing, Beverly-san?”

“Hm? My work for the day is done, so I was heading to the casino for some fun and to maybe make some money. Due to the state laws, minors can play at the casinos here.”

“…Yeah, where is the casino, anyway? That other place was filled with nothing but junk.”

“?”

Beverly stared in puzzlement in response to Saten’s words to herself.

“Well, you should get to sleep soon so tomorrow won’t be too terrible for you. Jetlag can really catch up to you later.”

“I see,” Saten responded and Beverly walked off.

If Saten followed her, she could find out where the casino was, but she did not do so. She had something more important to do.

(I want to find out about Xochitl as soon as possible…)

Saten bit at her thumbnail in a bad habit and her sandal-covered feet made slight tapping noises as she walked along. She wandered back and forth in front of Mikoto’s room before finally coming to a stop.

(I don’t know what organization she belongs to or where she came from.)

In other words, she did not know enough to directly look for information on Xochitl.

(But she has to be connected to one of the things going on here in Liberal Arts City. If the Laveze Squadron and the flying fish are fighting, then there must be something in common they’re fighting over. That means that I might be able to find out why the flying fish are attacking and what Xochitl was doing here if I look into what’s going on in the city itself.)

Saten then headed away from Mikoto’s room.

She was going to investigate what was going on in Liberal Arts City and she had a good idea where the most suspicious place was.

The three girls wanted to just lounge in the café as long as they could, but it would be a waste if they ended up sleeping through the next day instead of enjoying the theme park. As such, Mikoto, Uiharu, and Shirai decided to call it a night.

To head for the elevator hall, they headed from the third floor café to the atrium lobby.

“The theme park sure is beautiful lit up at night like that. Look, they’re using a projector to play a movie directly on the ocean’s surface. The pamphlet said something about swimming in the ocean of wondrous light, didn’t it?”

“I don’t know. The dark ocean seems kind of scary to me.”

“It seems you borrow a bracelet when you swim in the ocean at night. It’s difficult to see someone if they’re drowning, so the bracelet can transmit your location at the press of a button. Also, the bracelet has an oxygen capsule inside that lasts for about 5 minutes.”

Mikoto felt like they could just let you borrow a lifejacket, but she guessed that the stiff lifejackets would make it hard to move and that they were unpopular due to not being very fashionable.

“Well, let’s wait for a night when they’re having a parade and then sneak out of the hotel. We need to make sure the lead teachers don’t spot us though.”

“…We’d definitely get lectured if they spotted us out this late even in the hotel. …Oh, Uiharu, what’s wrong?”

“N-nothing…”

Uiharu had been looking down at the lower part of the atrium, but she hurriedly looked back when Shirai spoke to her. She had a bit of puzzlement in her heart.

(Hmm, did I just imagine that…?)

At the bottom of the atrium on the first floor lobby, she had thought she had seen Saten Ruiko walking along.

She was of course headed for that place.

Saten Ruiko headed straight there. She was heading for the central landmark of Liberal Arts City that was a ways from the hotel. It was the giant set used as a rocket launching pad in the SF movie filmed in the city. The night before, she had mistaken it for the entrance to a casino and had gone in with Mikoto, but…

“Hm? Huh? …It won’t open?”

Saten grabbed the doorknob, but it only made a clacking sound while barely moving. There was a calculator-like device next to the door, but she had thought the door had opened with just a turn of the knob before.

(What’s going on…?)

A normal person like Saten Ruiko did not realize that there was actually a strict lock on the door and that Mikoto had used her power to open it. And even if she had managed to get the door open, there were plenty of sensors beyond it that she was completely unaware of.

All Saten knew was that the door would not open.

That meant she had to find a different entrance.

(But there isn’t just going to be some convenient—Wait a second.)

Saten was not sure what to do, but then she realized something.

There was another entrance.

She did not actually know if it connected to the same place, but she did know one other place that led to a Liberal Arts City restricted zone.

And so Saten came to the place where Xochitl had left earlier that day.

It was the promenade near the shopping mall a little bit away from the beach. It was the place where that flying fish-like craft had burst from the sand.

If that flying fish had come from a restricted zone, then a large entrance should have been opened there.

“There it is…” Saten muttered.

Like it was the scene of a murder, an area was marked off with tape that said “keep out” in English on it. The “entrance” was covered with a plastic sheet like it was a large pitfall.

“…”

Saten looked around the area, but she did not see anyone like an official. She ducked under the “keep out” tape and flipped up one side of the plastic sheet.

Underneath were numerous large metal sheets that were usually used in road construction. Saten grabbed the edge of one of them, but she did not think she could lift it up. They were larger than tatami, so construction equipment would be needed to lift them.

(Hmm. What do I do now…?)

Saten gave up trying to move the metal sheet and looked around to see if there was anything she could use.

Suddenly, something struck her back.

When she turned around, she saw a spare metal sheet leaning against a building wall. It had lost its balance when she had run into it, so the bottom of the heavy piece of metal slid across the sand causing it to fall.

“Wah wah wah!?”

Saten evaded to the side. The sliding metal sheet struck one of the other metal sheets covering the hole and slid it to the side.

(Oh, there's a gap…)

The movement of the metal sheet had opened a gap big enough for a person to slip through. Saten lay down on her stomach and slid into the gap.

Misaka Mikoto returned to her hotel room.

She had been on guard and had cautiously watched her surroundings that entire day, but there had been no sign of the officials trying anything. It also seemed unlikely they were bugging her room. It seemed Liberal Arts City really had no intention of using any violent means as long as Mikoto and Saten did not do anything they shouldn't.

It all depended on their actions.

If the two of them became what the city considered to be enemies that would cause even more damage, the city would seriously attempt to eliminate them. It might come in the form of a direct surprise attack pretending to be some random attacker on the street or they could use the ocean and pass it off as an accident at sea.

(But…)

The battle that day between the fighters of the Laveze Squadron and the mysterious flying fish had developed right under the tourists' noses. And that time, the flying fish seemed to have had the advantage because they had managed to fire missiles at multiple Liberal Arts City buildings.

There did not seem to have been any obvious injuries, but that might not be true the next time.

She couldn't just let that continue, but…

(Even if I do decide to investigate this, how am I supposed to get close to the city's secrets? I can't access the secret information over the network because it isn’t connected, but if I go into a facility directly, I might run into an official again.)

Even for Mikoto, making an enemy of a giant city-sized organization was something she would rather avoid. And if she did infiltrate a foreign country’s secret area, she would end up having to defeat all of the legitimate forces attempting to stop her. She would clearly be treated as a terrorist.

Just because the flying fish were attacking and the officials were hiding something did not mean that Liberal Arts City was in the wrong. In fact, it was possible that the city was doing something good and the flying fish were coming to destroy it.

In the worst case, getting a little violent would be fine, but even if Liberal Arts City had done nothing wrong, she could not stand the situation. Even if she was going to take physical action, she first had to figure out who was good and who was evil.

(Of course, they could both be evil.)

There may have been a limit to how much Mikoto could do on her own.

She thought about the other girls who had come with her from Japan.

(There’s Kuroko and her teleportation and Uiharu-san and her information warfare.)

If she got help from Shirai who could freely move around while ignoring the three dimensional restrictions, she could sneak into the facilities while ignoring the walls, floors, and ceilings. That way, it would not be hard to slip through the blind spots in the security that was set up on the assumption that people would have to pass through the corridors.

And if she got help from Uiharu who worked in Judgment, her efficiency of searching for information over the network would go up. Also, she could just leave all the data investigation to Uiharu leaving herself to focus on the surroundings.

It would definitely be reassuring to have those two on her side, but…

(But if I asked that of them, I’d be getting them involved…)

That was the sticking point.

Mikoto wanted to avoid that if she could.

(So what do I do?)

Mikoto continued to think and did not take action.

She had tried her method of taking action on her own the night before and it had failed. The Ace of Tokiwadai Middle School was not so hasty as to repeat the same mistake twice.

It was a sanitary area.

The corridor Saten walked down looked more like it was from a giant spaceship in an SF movie than in a factory. She still had a lot of sand stuck to her, but she did not particularly care. She was too nervous to care.

Multiple other passageways travelled along the length and width of the area, but along one route, the walls and floor were dented and scraped. That flying fish had likely forced its way through there. Saten followed that path.

She had honestly not expected for things to go that well.

She had been thinking of turning back so as not to be noticed once she spotted an official or a guard, but once she went inside, there did not seem to be anyone there. Before she knew it, she had made it quite a ways from the entrance.

In places, she had to duck under “keep out” tape stretched across the path or push through black sheets blocking the path, but she continued along.

(Where am I…?)

At first she had been walking in an underground area, but she had gone up and down small flights of stairs again and again and was passing through a round duct with a radius of over 2 meters. She had long since lost track of how high up or low down she was.

(The interior seems a bit different here. Does this duct connect to a different building?)

All she could grasp was that she seemed to be walking in a large building on the surface that she had gotten to via an underground passageway.

Saten continued on.

She was determined to investigate Liberal Arts City's mysteries, but she had not thought at all about what she intended to find. Her investigation was exceedingly risky because she had no idea where her goal was or what she had to find to be successful.

Suddenly, the path before her tapered off. It looked like she had come to a rectangular exit to the tunnel. Saten ran that way and her range of vision greatly opened up.

"!!"

She was in the place she had come to with Mikoto the night before. It was the large hanger-like area with lots of broken flying fish lined up in it. She had not come in through the same entrance as before, but the area was measured in the kilometers. It would have been odd if there had only been a single entrance.

However, there was something different from the night before.

The hangar that had been wrapped in a sense of cleanliness was utterly destroyed. Multiple explosions must have occurred there. Black circles with 10 meter radiuses were burned in numerous places on the floor like dried flowers. The already broken flying fish had been turned to piles of ash and scraps. It looked like a giant broom had swept up all the trash.

It wasn't just the stored flying fish that had been destroyed. The building itself had been warped. The metal floor had been ripped apart like torn stockings and about half the lights hanging from the ceiling had been shattered. The steel passageways running along above had also been broken in the explosions and one of them was hanging down near where Saten stood.

(Xochitl…)

Saten did not know what reason they had, but Xochitl and her group had definitely been the ones that had done that.

Those flying fish had destroyed the city.

Thinking that made Saten’s chest feel tight, but she could not stop there.

She approached the scrapped flying fish tentatively because she was afraid of the broken steel passageways falling down on her.

Those were the crafts Xochitl and her group used.

Mikoto had attempted to investigate them the day before. Most likely, the ones the Laveze Squadron managed to shoot down were brought to that hangar. If the flying fish were a real enemy to Liberal Arts City, then their goal was simple. They wanted to investigate their enemy.

“…”

However, what was before Saten was truly just a pile of trash. It looked like the flying fish made of wood, cloth, and obsidian had been torn up by giant gears and their remains had been piled up there.

What had Xochitl and her group been trying to do?

Xochitl had spoken with her comrade before Saten’s eyes earlier that day, but that gave her no hint because she had not understood the language they used.

(Was their goal to destroy these flying fish…?)

Saten thought for a bit, but she then shook her head. That wasn’t it. Those flying fish were the ones that had been shot down by the Laveze Squadron. In other words, they were stolen in the middle of the fighting and therefore could not have been what had started the fighting.

There was a greater reason.

But could she figure out what that greater reason was just by searching there?

She had a feeling the explosions she had seen earlier that day had occurred all across the city. That hangar may have just been one stop along the way and the main reason they were there was in a completely different facility.

(What do I do…? Do I investigate further in here or do I go elsewhere?)

Suddenly, Saten felt as if something was off.

It had to do with the wall.

The large explosions had dented the large metal wall like it was made of aluminum foil and there were thin cracks running through it in places. However, something was odd about it. Saten moved from the pile of the remnants of the flying fish and approached the thick wall. She brought her face closer and looked carefully.

She soon realized what seemed off.

That wall was a not a wall.

(This is…a door…)

Like in a factory for large passenger planes, one of the walls was made to slide open and closed. The scale had simply been so great that Saten had mistaken it for a wall that entire time. In fact, even if it could slide open, it may still have been correct to refer to it as a wall. After all, it was over a meter thick.

Of course, Saten could not move a door that gigantic on her own.

If she looked around, she might have been able to find a switch to open and close it, but someone would definitely notice if she activated such a large device.

However, the explosions in the hangar had been so great that they had warped the giant door in places. Saten ran alongside the door and finally found the midpoint between the two halves that slid in opposite directions. As she expected, a slight gap had opened between the two warped sections of the door.

The opening was only about a meter up and down and 10 centimeters left and right.

She could not fit her body through it.

Saten peered in through the gap.

On the other side was a reddish light. As expected, there was an even more mysterious place beyond that door. There were no large objects there. After about 100 meters was another gigantic sliding door-like wall. It seemed to be the kind of double door used in sterilization. The true space must have been beyond that other wall.

(C’mon…Just a little further and I could have figured this out!!)

Without thinking, she stuck her hands into the gap in the door, but that of course did not widen the gap.

And then Saten Ruiko saw it.

“…………………………………………………………………………………

There was something in that area beyond the gap that was filled with a reddish light.

It was difficult to see because of the colored light, but there was a red label about the size of a banknote. She noticed the label on the floor near the gap, but when she looked around again, she noticed dozens if not hundreds of them plastered over the floor, the walls, and probably the ceiling, too. On that red label that was abnormally, neurotically, and excessively plastered everywhere was a short warning in English. Even Saten who knew no English beyond the middle school first year textbook level knew enough to see how strong a warning it was.

She did not know all of the specific words used, but what it said generally was: *Contamination Warning. Off limits to all workers*.

Saten Ruiko’s breathing stopped. She put her hands to her mouth and stepped unsteadily back from the gap. She suddenly had the worst possible idea as to why she had not run across a single official or guard and why there had been that “keep out” tape and those black sheets put up.

(What…?)

Saten felt like she had gotten a glimpse of what Xochitl and the others in the flying fish had been trying to destroy and what that thick door was supposed to be protecting.

(What is this…!?)

That was no longer a problem Saten could deal with alone. No, it had not been something she should have been doing alone from the beginning. Shirai Kuroko, a Level 4, and Misaka Mikoto, a Level 5, were back at the hotel. Uiharu Kazari was usually not too reliable, but she was a member of Judgment, the group that helped keep the peace in Japan’s Academy City. She needed to consult them. That threat made the explosions earlier that day seem like nothing. Fear of death accurately pierced into Saten’s chest.

However, Saten’s body would not move.

She had to get away from there as quickly as possible, but she could not move a single finger.

She felt some kind of pressure on her own back. Nothing was actually touching her and no wind had blown, but a vague presence or presentiment removed from her normal five senses pounded an intense sense of danger into Saten Ruiko’s heart.

“You should not have done that,” said a calm adult woman’s voice.

The words were as polite as the words of a receptionist at a large corporation and Saten thought her heart was going to stop when she heard them.

The woman continued from behind her.

“I believe I told you here yesterday that this could not end quietly…”

She had seen something she had not the night before.

Saten Ruiko had found something that Misaka Mikoto had not.

The woman’s words almost sounded sympathetic as she more or less said that Saten was going to be executed.

“…”

At that time, Saten Ruiko had no idea what expression was on her face.

She was unable to regulate her own heart as her head was grabbed by the giant invisible hand of fate that slowly, slowly turned her around.

What she found there was…

Chapter 5

It was seven in the morning.

As they had a rare break from school (the trip was technically a type of extracurricular activity, but it was a bit like a half-golden week for the students because of all the free time), some people decided to just sleep in, but some people ended up waking up early because they were on vacation. To put it simply, they wanted to go have fun as soon as possible and for as long as possible. Misaka Mikoto and Shirai Kuroko were in a rest area on the third floor of the hotel.

The third floor was still connected to the atrium of the lobby. At the four corners of the passageways surrounding that atrium were small rest areas with sofas, tables, and magazine racks.

Mikoto was sitting on a sofa and flipping through Liberal Arts City pamphlets while still wearing her killer whale-like racing swimsuit.

“…Y’know, after three days, I’m really starting to miss tofu and grilled fish. Where should we get breakfast? I wonder if they have a Japanese restaurant…”

As she muttered about food, she looked at a page that introduced the restaurants inside or near the hotel.

Meanwhile, Shirai Kuroko was lying down and rolling around on the same sofa. (She had been begging to rest her head on her beloved onee-sama’s lap, but she had been beaten back.)

“…Y’know, after three days of wearing this sexy swimsuit, it’s kind of lost its freshness. It’s like how curry tastes even better on the second day, but it gives you a face like you’re about to vomit on the third or fourth day.”

The pigtailed girl was looking for something new and she looked through some pamphlets while lying down in order to kill some time.

Suddenly, beams of light shot from Shirai Kuroko’s eyes.

“Th-that’s it!!”

“Nn!?”

Mikoto’s shoulders jumped.

Shirai jumped up from the sofa and stuck a spread out pamphlet before Mikoto’s face.

“This is it! This is it! This is exactly what I’ve been looking for, onee-sama!!”

“Wai—wha—you id—a nudist beach!? Why does something like that exist on the edge of Liberal Arts City!?”

Mikoto pulled her head back in order to get as far away from that obscene pamphlet as she could.

A nudist beach was the kind of beach where people swam around without swimsuits on. Simply put, it was the kingdom of nudity.

For some reason, Shirai’s eyes were sparkling and she had her hands clasped in front of her face in full maiden mode.

The flowers of Shirai’s heart that were made of pink and white were in full bloom and she was getting rather troublesome.

“Really, there is nothing wrong with my swimsuit, but humans occasionally want stimulation from a different vector!! So instead of changing things with cheap tricks like making one’s swimsuit showier or plainer, we can go there and be completely nude! That bold idea will open up the future, onee-sama!!”

“Don’t look to me to agree with you!! Oh, th-that’s right! Don’t nudist beaches have age restrictions?”

“Nudists who wish to be nude hold no lust in their hearts!! They cast off their clothing with more serious hearts.”

“That idea may be respectable, but I find it hard to believe coming from you, so just stop this, you pervert.”

After saying that, Mikoto suddenly realized something.

Shirai Kuroko had gotten tired of her sexy swimsuit. Mikoto wanted to tell her to put on some normal clothes instead, but it seemed Shirai’s tastes would only bring more skin into the picture.

That was where the nudist beach came into play, but if she let Shirai go with it, the girl would eventually get used to the nudist beach, too. Since there was no more skin you could show than when you were nude, even Shirai and her love of showing off skin would have no other option but to head in the direction of adding more cloth.

In other words…

(This is the start of a U-turn!! If I can withstand this idiot’s madness, she’ll start putting on clothes like a reversal of the North Wind and the Sun!!)

That problem did not just apply to the beaches of Liberal Arts City.

If she could influence Shirai Kuroko’s progression, it was her big chance to turn the girl into a proper human.

After coming to that conclusion, Misaka Mikoto grinned.

She gave some incredibly forced applause in praise of Shirai Kuroko.

“W-well, if you say that, I guess I have no choice. W-we need to just cast off our shame on a trip. If you’re that determined to go to a nudist beach, then I won’t stop you.”

“…Wh-what? Onee-sama, I should have gotten an offensive reaction out of you, but you’ve just had that smile fixed on your face. It looks like you are plotting something.”

“Wh-what are you talking about? You just said something wonderful for a change and the scales have fallen from my eyes…”

“Hah!? Is this a plan to attack me from behind while my defenses are lowered on the nudist beach!? I-I will go prepare more sun oil than is necessary and wait for you!!”

“Hell no, you pervert!”

As soon as Mikoto unintentionally gave her honest response, Uiharu Kazari entered from the elevator hall. She must have been in a bit of a hurry because she was running a bit.

Mikoto turned her gaze from the exhibitionist and looked toward Uiharu.

“Hey, where should we get breakfast? I’m in the mood for some Japanese food.”

“G-good morning. U-um…Uh, do you know where Saten-san has gone?”

“?”

Mikoto and Shirai looked puzzled and Uiharu continued.

“I thought she might have overslept again, so I tried calling her room, but she didn’t answer. If she isn’t in her room, I thought she might have come here already.”

“I haven’t seen her.”

“…Are you sure she didn’t just go off somewhere on her own?”

“But if she went to get some food on her own, wouldn’t she have contacted us? She was acting odd yesterday too… What if she’s been sick for a while now and she collapsed in her room…?”

Uiharu was oddly overcome by unease because she had noticed the change in her friend the day before.

She wanted to go check on Saten’s room, but she did not feel right about asking the hotel for a spare key if she had no proof.

That was why Uiharu timidly looked over at Shirai Kuroko.

Shirai was a Level 4 that could teleport.

With her power, it did not matter if the door was locked.

Mikoto’s power could unlock the electronic lock, but it was clear which was more discreet between Mikoto forcibly opening the door and Shirai bypassing it altogether.

Shirai turned aside.

“What a pain.”

“Kuroko.”

“I know, I know,” Shirai said in response to Mikoto’s short comment. “I’ll do it if you go to the nudist beach with me, onee-sama.”

“I’ll take you to your own personal paradise with my fist. ☆”

Shirai Kuroko arrived in front of Saten’s room with tears in her eyes and while rubbing the top of her head. Just to be sure, she knocked on the door a few times. It seemed even she did not want to intrude on another’s privacy for no reason.

But no response came.

Shirai sighed and then her body silently disappeared. She had teleported to the other side of the door.

After 2 or 3 minutes, the door to Saten’s room opened from the inside. Shirai had unlocked it and she shook her head toward Mikoto and Uiharu.

“She is not in her room. It seems she has gone somewhere.”

“…? So did she go get some breakfast on her own?”

“About that…” Shirai paused for a second as if she were conflicted about whether she should say something. “The air conditioner has been off for a long period of time making the room quite humid. And there is no sign that the shower room has been used. I doubt a girl would leave after waking up without at least washing her face first.”

“So…?”

Uiharu looked puzzled. She must not have been able to conceive what the situation was.

Mikoto took a step toward Shirai and asked her some questions.

“What the furniture and the interior? Are there signs of a struggle?”

“Onee-sama?”

“Just answer me.”

Mikoto was reminded of the official she had met two nights before. Saten had seen something she shouldn’t have along with Mikoto.

However, Shirai shook her head.

“From my experience in Judgment, I would say no. And even if the rooms are divided by walls, the guests in the next room would have noticed if there had been a commotion.”

“I guess it’s too much to suspect they may have covered up all the traces… And if they had, they would have kept the air conditioner and the shower room in a more natural state.”

“???”

Shirai and Uiharu did not know what to make of what Mikoto was muttering.

Mikoto looked over at Shirai.

“There are around 20 students here on this large-scale field trip, right? Find a Psycho-type esper and bring them here. Use your authority from Judgment or whatever, just hurry.”

“Eh? Wait a second, Misaka-san,” said Uiharu finally speaking up. “What do you mean? Is this really a situation where Judgment has any authority?”

She sounded worried, but that wasn’t too surprising. Judgment helped keep the peace in Academy City. They were something like the police. Anyone would be worried if someone like that was called out to search for a friend you had lost track of.

“It’s just to be on the safe side.”

As such, Mikoto had no choice but to be rather vague in her wording.

She had no proof, but in that situation, no proof was a good thing.

Mikoto and Uiharu waited in Saten’s room and after about 10 minutes, Shirai teleported back. She was holding an unfamiliar girl’s hand. The girl was likely older than Mikoto and the others. She seemed to be a high school student and she wore a bikini held together by ring-like parts in places.

“I heard a friend of yours has gotten lost in this ridiculously huge facility,” said the Psychometry girl.

Shirai must have explained it that way and it wasn’t exactly wrong.

“Let me warn you now: if I read any unnecessary personal information, that isn’t my responsibility. Don’t forget that you will be the ones that have to bow down in apology to her.”

“…I take it your power has its issues.”

“Some, yes.”

The girl laughed and pulled a few hairclips from somewhere. She must have had some reason for it, but she had hairclips clipped onto her swimsuit in various places.

“Hmm. So that’s how you keep your mental focus.”

“I usually keep them on my underwear, but I’m glad I have the swimsuit at times like this. I have to carefully aim so that I only read the necessary information. After all, there’s no point in reading information on a hotel worker that entered the same room.”

As she spoke, she slowly walked around the room.

Suddenly, she stopped moving. As if she had grasped the general location of a landmine, she slowly approached the bed.

“What…?” she finally muttered.

She looked over toward Mikoto.

“What are you all doing here? That’s going too far for a field trip.”

“What do you mean?” Mikoto responded.

The girl pointed toward the bed.

“The girl from this room was thinking about discovering the secrets hidden in Liberal Arts City and then left the room.”

Saten Ruiko was trembling.

Her hands were handcuffed behind her back. Near where Saten was sitting in the hangar, an adult woman was standing and leaning against the wall.

She was the Liberal Arts City official named Olive Holiday that Saten and Mikoto had met the day before as well.

However, she was wearing a different outfit from before. Her entire body including her head was covered in a yellow protective suit. It may have been fireproof as well because it was made of a shiny material similar to what firefighters wore. Her voice was quite soft rather than muffled. Most likely, her voice was picked up by a microphone within the suit and speakers on the outside outputted it.

Something like a plastic bag was placed at Olive’s feet. It was similar to the kind of case one would put fishing gear in. She had pulled the handcuffs from it. Most likely, she had other tools to confine people or to cause pain within it.

Olive spoke into a small radio.

“Dawn has come.”

“Yes.”

“Is management still discussing it? Whether we’re going to let her go, give her a warning, or use some *other* method, I would have thought they would have come to a decision much sooner.”

“You know they’re always like this. And I’m sure you can understand why they need to be so cautious given the situation.”

Saten’s shoulder’s trembled.

She did not know any English beyond the first year middle school level, so she could not understand the details of what they were saying. However, the danger she was in was still conveyed to her. When she had come there before, she had been released more quickly. She had not been restrained for a long period of time like that.

Something was different.

It felt to her like she was heading in a train along the same track to the same destination, but someone had suddenly pulled a switching lever sending her toward some unknown destination.

“But leader, even if you are wearing that protective suit, it would be better if you did not stay there for long periods of time. You should hand her over to us and return to your post.”

“Hmph. The contamination? We don’t actually know anything about that. There are no abnormalities in the readings, but we still dress like this in fear because we don’t understand it. We don’t even know if there is any contamination or if these suits will protect us if there is.”

“…”

“This may be the reward we get for researching something we don’t understand at all, but that’s the duty of the world police.”

Olive sounded bored.

Suddenly, she started speaking of something unrelated to the job at hand.

“Where did you work before here?”

“…On a mission to destroy Russian pipelines. The reasoning was that oil dealings that do not benefit us had no reason to exist,” said Olive’s subordinate in a sinking voice.

High prices on crude oil made the entire world suffer and having that business go bankrupt would cause a hell of starvation to spread throughout the world, so seeing that black liquid pouring from a tear in a giant pipeline like it was hot water was unlikely to be an enjoyable experience.

“I took part in ‘drawing the lines’ for the stations in Antarctica. We were working to create a new map. Due to global warming, the ice melted. Some countries’ research stations were swallowed up by crevasses because the ground beneath them weakened and gave out.” Olive was speaking dryly. “There were foreign researchers walking through Antarctica surrendering in the hopes of being rescued after having lost their stations. We shot them one by one from the distance. After all, if we gave them shelter in our station, they could take our technology back to their own countries.”

“…”

“In the end, it’s the same anywhere. And I had thought you only found bodies in certain special places.”

“It’s only until we can carry out our duties as the world police.”

“Yes. Peace is surprisingly cheap. You can accomplish it just by killing all those who disagree with you.”

The official smiled a bit self derisively and some kind of action could be heard on the other side of the radio.

It sounded like her subordinate was flipping through numerous sheets of paper. The subordinate understood quite well how to follow the decisions that Liberal Arts City came to.

Finally, the subordinate spoke.

"Management has come to its decision."

"Is it as expected?"

"Yes."

"I see," said Olive quietly before turning toward Saten Ruiko.

The girl trembling by the wall heard two words in English.

"I'm sorry."

Mikoto stepped closer to the Psychometry high school girl who was still confused.

"Do you know where Saten-san went? Can you trace her path!? Can you use your power to follow the route Saten-san took!?"

"No." The girl shook her head. "My power is not suited for that kind of thing. Even if I tried, the first floor lobby would probably be my limit. Do you know how many people go through there in a day? The residual information from all those people mixes together and turns everything into useless noise."

Mikoto just barely held back from calling the girl useless and then gave Shirai a signal with her finger. The Psychometry girl looked like she wanted to say something more, but Shirai gently took her away.

Mikoto and Uiharu remained in the room.

Mikoto doubted something that would conveniently lead them to Saten would be in the room, but it was also unlikely that they could find her by randomly running around the large city.

"U-um, Misaka-san…" Uiharu started to say, but she stopped.

It looked to Mikoto like she wanted to ask something, but was afraid of what the answer would be.

And that was why Mikoto took the initiative.

“I can’t give you any specifics, but it’s possible Saten-san has come across some of Liberal Arts City’s classified information. She most likely left the room voluntarily, but it’s unknown where she went after that. It’s possible the officials of this city have gotten involved.”

“You don’t mean…”

“But they will not harm us so easily. Or rather, they seem to have created some strange rule to that effect. As long as they continue following that rule, Saten-san is not in an immediately dangerous situation.”

As she spoke, Mikoto sorted through the information in her head.

Teachers belonging to Anti-Skill were leading that large-scale field trip. Mikoto wondered whether she should get help from them, but she shook her head. The power of the adults was the power of groups, but they were not in Academy City. Anti-Skill would be of no use. Also, the adults would bring out the rules and regulations preventing Mikoto and the others from doing anything. In that situation where every second counted, the adults would just get in their way.

But how were they supposed to find where Saten Ruiko was?

Given what had happened with Olive Holiday, the official Mikoto and Saten had met before, even if Saten had been captured by the officials, she may not be in danger immediately. However, Mikoto could not be sure of that and if Saten had been captured by a different official, she may be treated in a completely different way.

Mikoto thought for a bit, and…

(That’s it…)

Mikoto glanced around the room and headed to the corner. The ATM-like device that let one put money on the IC card that acted as a wallet was there.

Previously, Mikoto had used that device to hack into Liberal Arts City’s network. If the officials were involved with Saten’s disappearance, they may have made some kind of communication over the network.

Mikoto used the charging device in the same way as before to try to hack in.

As before, the security seemed outdated compared to Academy City’s, so she made it right in and then checked on a few pieces of information. In the security system’s alert information, she found a report file with an image of someone who appeared to be Saten Ruiko.

“Found her!!”

However, the location Saten had been photographed in was encrypted.

“Dammit, what a pain… This is the kind of encryption that will take some time to analyze.”

The theory itself was simple, but it would take time to decrypt. However, they did not have that time. Mikoto was conflicted about whether she should continue on that path or try to locate the girl from a different angle.

“…Please move aside,” came a sudden voice from the side.

Before Mikoto could turn around, Uiharu Kazari pushed past Mikoto. Mikoto didn’t know where she it had been hidden, but Uiharu now held a rod slightly longer than a ballpoint pen. Uiharu pressed a button on it and a clear sheet shot out like it was a scroll. It was an ultra-thin waterproof computer made from a highly flexible printed circuit board.

With a slight electronic hum, an image of a keyboard appeared on the transparent sheet. The two devices were not connected by any cables, but the old(-looking) charger and the ultra-thin computer immediately linked together.

Uiharu’s fingers races along the keys.

The encryption was cracked in 7 seconds.

After that, multiple windows opened up one after another and various parts of the network were analyzed in multiple ways. It had gone beyond something as simple as hacking into the network. An invisible king had appeared within that system that could work faster than its supervisor or its creator. She was not simply leaving things to the specs of the Academy City machine and investigating what she came across. She analyzed the composition of the network in an instant, took the fastest but safest shortcuts, and passed through backdoors in order to reach the information she wanted faster than anyone and doing the least amount of work.

Mikoto saw the instant that the speed of the brute force random access exceeded what human intelligence could comprehend. Television shows occasionally showed a genius technician’s intuition and fingers getting greater readings than a major company’s precision machines, but Mikoto felt that she was truly seeing it before her very eyes.

“Found it,” Uiharu Kazari said paying no heed to Mikoto’s surprise. “Because of a computer being intentionally cut off from the network, I cannot say anything with certainty, but from the information I can access, Saten-san must be here.”

Saten had a feeling that, after leaving the hangar, she had been taken along a long road or tunnel in a car or a train before getting out and walking down some kind of long passageway.

Saten Ruiko’s explanation was so vague because she had been stuffed in some kind of bag while in the vehicle and she was walking blindfolded. The human senses must have relied a lot on sight because she felt like her senses of distance and balance were distorted. It was even harder to walk because her hands were still handcuffed behind her back. When humans walked, they held out their hands to keep their balance and Saten was made aware of that simple fact more than she ever wished to be.

She wanted to run away.

She wanted to let out a shout and run as quickly as she could.

However, Saten could feel something hard pressed against her back which kept that desire in check. It was not sharp like a blade. The odd feeling felt like some kind of rod, but she could not tell if it was made of metal or plastic. Because she could not tell for sure what it was, her imagination went all out keeping Saten from doing anything bold. She had no choice but to walk along as the official told her.

When had the change occurred?

She first noticed it with her sense of smell. She started to smell salt water. Next, she heard the sound of waves. Then, the flat feeling of the floor beneath her sandals changed to something like stepping on stone. Finally, the light got bright enough to be noticeable through the blindfold.

They had left the facility and were now somewhere outside.

Suddenly, Saten felt the official’s fingers near her ear. She jumped out of shock, but the official ignored her and removed her blindfold. A brilliant light burned into her eyes like when facing the spotlight on stage.

Because it was early morning, the light felt like it was coming from straight ahead rather than from above.

“…Kh…”

She held up a hand to obstruct the sunlight and after a while her vision returned to normal. They were indeed outside of the facility.

But…

“A rocky area…?”

They were not on one of the beaches covered in white sand that were all over Liberal Arts City. The area they were in was likely manmade as well, but it was an area made of black rock. The hard feeling of the rocks mixed with seawater and a bit of sand brought only unease and discomfort.

The rock was not just at their feet. A wall of rock rose up in the direction of the land and a portion stretched out above them like a ceiling. Saten was standing in a -shaped area.

When she turned back toward the direction they had come from, she saw a few constructions made of silver pipes and concrete embedded in the rock. They looked a lot like the something from the fish farms one would see on TV, but they were likely fakes. They were nothing more than decorations hiding the entrance to the facility.

“It seems the contamination really was an error in judgment on management’s part. I can understand being overly nervous, but I would rather it did not get in the way of our work.”

Saten turned in the direction of that voice and found Olive. At some point, she had removed the yellow protective suit. She was now wearing only a sporty racing swimsuit and a lifejacket.

“It was made to look quite natural, wasn’t it?” Olive said proudly.

She was staring at the surrounding rocky area.

“This was not in Liberal Arts City when it was first created for the filming of that SF movie. We had it hurriedly made because it was necessary.”

“…?”

Olive continued speaking with a smile like she was telling a child how to enjoy the attractions at an amusement park for the first time.

“Accidental drownings occur here again and again. We officials are worried for the safety of the guests, so we have put up a sign saying it is off limits, but couples in love continue to come here to escape the eyes of the public. People could just enjoy swimming in the designated areas, but they end up coming to somewhere like this and then they have unfortunate accidents.”

Saten Ruiko could feel the muscles in her face moving unnaturally. No, it was not just her face. She knew she was in danger, but she could not come up with anything she could do about it, so she felt her body trembling like her muscles were not sure what to do, like bubbles were coming to the surface, or like a change in the earth’s crust was making the ground swell up.

“Do you know why we purposefully constructed such a dangerous place?” Olive said as she reached inside her lifejacket and put on the plastic gloves she pulled out.

“…Ah…”

“Even if someone drowns here and even if the body of some traveler from a distant country is found floating here, no one will find it unnatural. Having a foreign corpse can be a bit of a problem, so we needed to come up with a creative way of dealing with that problem.”

“Wahh!?”

Saten Ruiko stepped back upon learning that it was no joke and it was something that had been naturally done again and again. However, her feet got tangled up and she fell onto her back. The hard and sharp rock injured her hands that she put out behind her and her back. However, Saten did not feel the pain at all. All she felt was fear wrapped around every part of her body.

A smile slowly spread across Olive's face and she spoke to Saten.

"You mustn't do that. If you bleed too much, it will stain the sea water."

"No…"

Saten ignored her and slid back along the rock to distance herself from Olive. Doing so scraped her back like the rocky surface was a giant file.

With a single step forward, Olive filled the gap Saten had made.

The approaching official grabbed Saten's hair and forcibly lifted her up.

"Agh!? S-stop. Stop!!"

Saten tried to move her arms, but her efforts only caused the handcuffs to rattle. She tried to kick Olive, but she could not muster any strength into her legs. With a battered-looking face, Saten tried to somehow think up a way to survive.

"I'm a student of Japan's Academy City! It would be a problem for you if an esper went missing here, right!? You said something about them fearing that military secrets had been leaked to America!!"

"Yes, that's true in the case of a Level 5. It seems opinions among management were split as to how to deal with you, but it was eventually agreed that it was within the acceptable range. Well, you are just a Level 0. You have almost no value. They said the disorder caused by your disappearance would be on a rather small scale."

"!?"

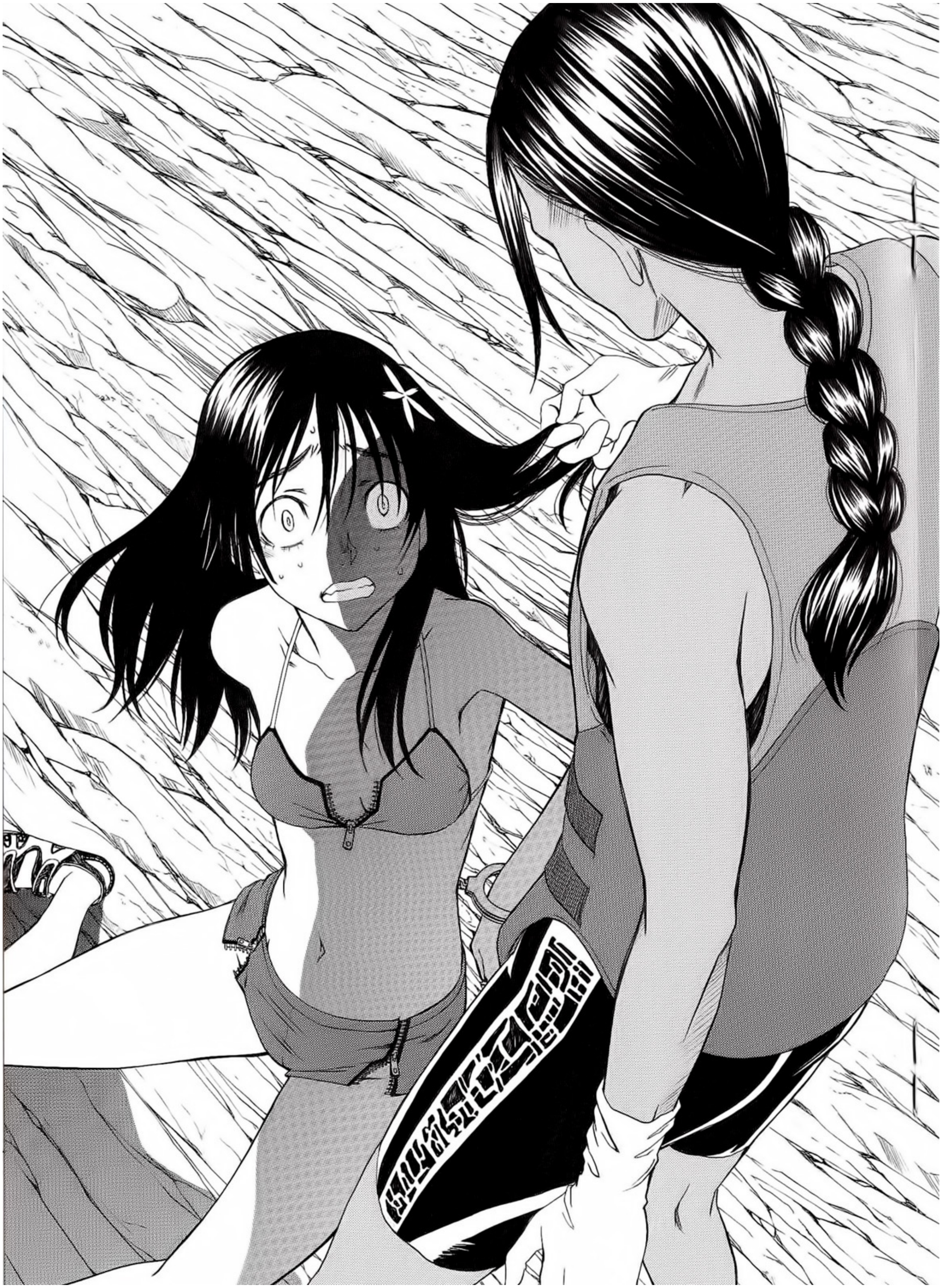
Those words were like a rusted blade carving out her heart, but Saten did not have time to be in shock.

“There are marks showing I have handcuffs on! If I rattle them around, I can make wounds, too!! Even if you remove them now, a careful examination will show I had them on!!”

“When someone drowns in a rocky area like this, their body is not necessarily found intact.”

Olive’s expression did not change.

Her smiling face looked like a precipice.



“Until the body is found, it is struck by the waves again and again and again and it scrapes against the rock…And the body is sometimes eaten by fish and crabs. As such, sometimes the hands have different numbers of fingers or the face is damaged beyond recognition. It is not too difficult to hide a wound or two.”

Saten could not get out any more words.

It was not going to end with nothing more than having her head plunged into the water. When she thought about the “process” that she was going to undergo afterwards, her vision went dark. She felt a more malicious chill run down her back than one simply from the fear of death.

Still grabbing Saten’s hair, the official pulled Saten toward her from the right as if she were bringing her in to kiss her.

“Now then, are you quite ready?”

“!!”

A transparent liquid spilled from Saten’s tear glands. That had been the last straw. She roared like a beast and tried to bite Olive’s nose with everything she had. She completely seriously tried to bite off the center of the woman’s face, but Olive easily swung her head back and used her other hand to give an upward blow to Saten’s jaw.

A dull sound split through Saten’s head and something leaked into her mouth that tasted of iron. Saten lost her momentum and limply hung down, but Olive pulled her up by her hair and walked over to the ocean dragging Saten along with her. With her consciousness dim, Saten looked up at the official holding her hair.

“…What was…?”

“?”

“What was in there…?”

Saten was asking about the new area beyond the giant door in the hangar. She was speaking of the double doors wrapped in a reddish light and with the huge amount of warning labels urging no one to enter. In the end, Saten Ruiko had not managed to reach the center of the secrets.

“Oh, that,” Olive replied bluntly.

She may have decided there was no reason to hide it after Saten had come that far or she may have admired the fact that Saten had not begged for her life.

“That is where those who are treated as having gone missing are put. I suppose you could call it a kind of laboratory. You are being treated as having died, so you will not go in there.”

“…”

“Liberal Arts City has the ability to naturally deal with any incident, accident, or other irregular situation as a type of show, but there is one thing we cannot erase no matter what. That is the people who are behind the incidents in the first place.”

The sea water was up to Olive’s thighs.

As Saten was being dragged along, it was up to her chest.

“We resolve the incidents without relying on any law enforcement agencies, but that is not because we are covering for the criminals. If we resolve things with our own hands, we can punish them in our own way.”

An especially large wave came in and the water reached Saten’s head.

The salt caused a burning pain to run down her nose and throat, but Olive did not seem to care.

Saten coughed and then tried to ask a question.

“But what are you…?”

“I see no need to tell you every little thing about what we are researching, but you saw a portion of it in that hangar.”

She must have been referring to the flying fish lined up like body bags.

Those special crafts had been made of wood, cloth, and obsidian and they had seemed to head in a different direction than what one thought of as cutting edge technology. However, those oddly-shaped crafts held the ability to more than match the Liberal Arts City Laveze Squadron.

“Strange, aren’t they? They look as if they contain hydrogen engines, but what they actually use is unknown. Multiple crashed ones were disassembled and their construction was analyzed, but even when the exact same parts were brought together, they did not function at all.”

Olive shook her head.

She sounded like she was speaking of something that did not involve her, so that was likely not the field she worked in.

“The mechanism behind those crafts is not complete. Or rather, they seem to be put together based on a set of laws completely different from the ones we know…They truly are exceedingly irregular devices.”

Olive may have said “they seem to be” because she did not understand what those laws were herself.

Saten’s footing started to get unsteady. Her feet still reached the bottom, but her sandals could not find secure footing either because the rocky bottom was slippery or because of the current in the water.

“However, those are nothing more than one type of equipment. What we want is the power they possess. We want the power possessed by the people piloting those crafts. They seem to have a rather powerful organization because we have not been able to capture one of their people. Recovering the crashed ships is the most we have been able to do.”

Olive laughed lightly.

“Of course, the longer the fight drags out, the more captured ships we get, so management has been innocently rejoicing. …I would rather they understood the hardships of those wearing their lives away on the battlefield, though. They may just be the object of our research, but they are quite tough.”

Was she referring to Xochitl and the others?

Was that the reason they were targeting Liberal Arts City?

Liberal Arts City was trying to find the secret behind some power, and Xochitl and the others were fighting to protect that secret. Was that the true identity of the conflict occurring in that city?

But…

What was that power Olive had mentioned…?

“In order to find new filming techniques, Liberal Arts City has called in painters, sculptors, potters, ukiyoe artists, doll makers, and other artists from every part of the world. In doing so, we also ended up gathering ancient knowledge that has nothing to do with the arts.”

The official spoke of the identity of that power.

“Special powers and phenomena that are removed from the normal physical laws appear here and there in that ancient knowledge. At first we thought it was nothing more than exaggerated legends, but when we looked into it, it almost seemed like a consistent set of laws could be seen in those stories. That was when we seriously started to research it. After all, ancient Chinese herbal medicines sometimes possess effects exceeding those of modern antibiotics.”

It was something that even an Academy City esper did not know of.

It was something that Saten Ruiko did not know the identity of.

“That’s right,” Olive said with a smile to Saten who was sinking below the surface of the water. “We are developing espers with a different approach from you in Academy City.”

Saten’s eyes opened wide.

Olive Holiday continued talking.

“To do that, we had to investigate those crafts, those special weapons that should not move under the normal laws.”

Misaka Mikoto and Uiharu Kazari left Saten’s room, rushed out of the hotel, and ran to the railroad that ran across Liberal Arts City. Using Shirai Kuroko’s teleportation would have been a faster means of transportation, but taking away the Psychometry girl must have taken some time because they could not contact her.

“I think Saten-san is probably on the easternmost side of Liberal Arts City. The general information on the facility was not on the network, so we would probably have to check the computer cut off from the network for that, but I have the data on just the location,” Uiharu said while running alongside Mikoto.

The hotel they were staying in was also on the eastern side, but given the scale of the city, it was not a distance that could easily be travelled on foot. They did not know Saten’s current situation, but they were headed into a Liberal Arts City facility. They had no time to be optimistic. Raiding the facility and forcibly resolving the problem using Mikoto’s Railgun had to be the best course of action.

They found the station quickly.

Heading back and forth through the air was a special kind of train that was something like a combination of a monorail and a roller coaster. The station was not an unrefined rectangular building. The platforms were lined up next to each other and surrounded by a glass building.

However, Mikoto and Uiharu were not able to enter the station.

With a tremendous noise, the wall of the building suddenly exploded.

The wall made of multiple pieces of glass shattered. The roller coaster-like curving rails were torn apart and they fell down to the ground destroying more rails on the way down. When the mass of constructions struck the white sand, a great sandstorm explosively spread out in all directions.

“Kyaahh!?” shouted Uiharu as she was swallowed up by the sandstorm.

Mikoto manipulated magnetism to bring the iron sand flying through the air under her control and swung it around to blow away the sandstorm.

A white line like the remnants of a contrail seemed to cut through the blue sky from a point in the air leading to the destroyed wall of the building. Something whooshed by in Mikoto's vision. It was about 20 meters up in the sky. A black form jumped from the beach to an inland waterway.

"A flying fish…!?" Mikoto yelled out upon seeing that oddly shaped craft that looked like two canoes, one on top of the other, with two wings on either side.

Even then, many more Mixcoatls were jumping from the beach to the inland waterways and heading further inland at high speed.

No screams came from the tourists around Mikoto. However, they were not exactly relieved. They seemed to be standing there staring blankly because they were not able to determine if they were seeing a show or a real attack.

"…"

Mikoto gritted her teeth and looked off at the horizon beyond the beach. She could see the multiple curving contrails of the Laveze Squadron fighting the Mixcoatls over the ocean, but the attackers seemed to have the advantage that time. The Laveze Squadron had allowed a real invasion of Liberal Arts City and repeated explosions could be heard.

(What terrible timing…)

"At any rate, we can't use the train now. Not all the rails have been taken out, but they're sure to stop all of them just to be safe!!"

"B-but then what about Saten-san…!?"

"Don't worry. The trains aren't the only means of transportation. If we can get a taxi…"

Mikoto trailed off as the multiple explosions and rumblings finally broke down the illusion the city had set up. Things had exceeded what one could accept as a show and true fear had set in on the people causing a panic.

As Mikoto and Uiharu stared in surprise, they heard a female voice.

"Hey, what are you doing just standing there!?"

They turned around to find the film director named Beverly.

“It’s dangerous there, so come with me! Hurry!! This is not a show!!” Beverly shouted as she grabbed Mikoto and Uiharu’s hands and tugged.

Mikoto and Uiharu were more flustered than Beverly.

“Wait! We have somewhere we need to go…!!”

“So you’re going to wait for a taxi? You’ll just be crushed to death if you stay here!!” Beverly yelled in response.

Due to the Mixcoatl missile destroying the rails, a large number of people were rushing from the station. People that could not tell the rails had been destroyed wanted to get away as quickly as possible, so they were rushing for the station. The two opposite flows of people collided which stopped the waves of people all at once. This only spread the chaos further. The river-like flow of people spread like its banks had collapsed.

As the commotion spread to where Mikoto and Uiharu were, Beverly forcibly pulled on their arms. The three of them hid in some nearby shelter at about the same time as the main pathway became utterly filled with people.

Beverly wiped away some sweat and sighed.

“The people trying to flee inside the buildings and the people who believe that being inside the buildings is more dangerous are colliding. The roads are no longer functioning. It’s like trying to walk through a packed train. The mass of people has become a wall.”

“No way…”

“If people can’t walk through, how is a large vehicle supposed to get through? I don’t know if this is a terrorist attack on the city or what, but at the very least, the city’s transportation has been completely cut off.”

Their last hope of a car could no longer be used. The mass of vehicles attempting to flee did nothing more than congest things further.

Mikoto was reminded again of what an odd place that was. The grand movie set the Liberal Arts City officials had created was noisily crumbling away.

(So a car won’t work either…)

They could not wait for a taxi with the way things were.

Mikoto and Uiharu felt like they were in a scene from a disaster movie.

The mass of panicked people was spreading in their direction. It was like a giant tsunami made of people.

“Dammit,” Beverly spat out. “I had thought those strange ships were odd. Unlike the other attractions or shows, it felt like they had no gimmick with which to purposefully guide the mentality of the guests. But if they aren’t part of a show, then what is going on in this city!?”

She seemed confused, but they didn’t have time to deal with her confusion.

Mikoto bluntly asked a question.

“Beverly-san, can you drive a motorcycle? There’s somewhere we need to go.”

“No, I don’t have a license and just look out there. The roads aren’t functioning as roads at all. I’m not joking when I saw you could end up getting crushed to death out there. Getting inside a large building and waiting for the disturbance to die down could save your life.”

“Damn,” Mikoto spat out.

They could not use the trains or a car. Even walking would be difficult.

Danger could be closing in on Saten while they were stuck there, but forcing their way forward held the risk of getting swallowed up by the waves of people and being injured or worse.

Mikoto pictured the map of the area in her mind, thought for a bit, and then turned toward Uiharu.

“Uiharu-san, let’s head back to the hotel.”

“No!!”

"Don't be mistaken. We're doing it to save Saten-san."

Mikoto grabbed Uiharu's shoulders and stared her in the eye. She spoke in a slow voice so that Uiharu's mind would not be swallowed up by the surrounding commotion.

"Kuroko should be somewhere in the hotel. We need to find her and use her teleportation to head to where Saten-san is. Understand?"

After seeing Uiharu nod twice, Mikoto looked over toward Beverly.

"What are you going to do, Beverly-san?"

"…I'm worried about the rest of your crew as well, but I think it would be better to wait for things to die down a little before heading for the hotel. Things are just too harsh right now. I really want to stop you from going, but…" Beverly trailed off for a bit. "Did something happen to that Saten girl?"

"…Yes."

Hearing that, Beverly gave a large sigh.

"Then I have no choice."

"?"

Mikoto frowned and Beverly spoke in a voice sounding like she found what she was doing to be a bother.

"I don't know the situation, but it seems you have a plan as long as you manage to get back to the hotel. Are you going to call in a helicopter somehow? Well, I won't ask for the details. …All I can do is use my filming techniques that read the hearts of the guests in order to lead you to the hotel without getting swallowed up by the waves of people."

"Beverly-san…"

Mikoto gave a bow of thanks.

Beverly turned it aside with a smile and then grabbed Mikoto and Uiharu's hands.

The area out in the open had turned into a flood of people.

Beverly spoke while looking out on that hellish scene.

“…This might truly be bad.”

Saten Ruiko did not understand what Olive had said.

What was it she had said?

“Those flying fish are the products of psychic powers…?” muttered Saten, but then she shook her head.

That wasn’t it.

It was true those flying fish were removed from modern aviation and sailing technologies and that they may have been developed under completely different laws, but Saten Ruiko felt that was different from the scientific psychic powers she knew. Saten was not a genius scientist. She had only gone through school in Academy City, so she did not know every little thing about the processes or chemical formulas that were used to develop psychic powers.

However, because Saten Ruiko had gone through school in Academy City, she could detect a vague “scent” in the theories behind those things. On that intuitive level, she did not detect that same “scent” from those flying fish or from Xochitl. She felt like those things functioned due to some theory independent from the ones in Academy City.

“Japan’s Academy City has monopolized cutting edge technology and has almost completely kept the field of developing psychic powers to itself. Also, they are quick to defend the data on their technology with everything they have. Even if we were to dissect the body of an esper such as you that was developed there and we did manage to get some detailed information, we would be pulling various triggers. …Management does not want that to happen.”

Olive Holiday did not notice it.

She was an outsider, so she did not notice that difference in the “scents”.

“But we do not need to use that cutting edge technology. If we use a more roundabout method that does not involve information on Academy City’s techniques, we can acquire that information in our own way. That is why we needed to reanalyze everything in such an analog way. If all we do is bring together ancient traditional knowledge and build up a new technical field, no one will stop us.”

Technology that was known as “new” was usually something that Academy City had been involved in researching or developing.

Liberal Arts City…no, America was trying to escape that limitation.

They were trying to create a new standard to act as a foundation that was different from what Academy City had created.

For example, electricity had become a foundation of life and technology was needed to generate that power. Improving power generation technology could have two different meanings.

The first was to raise the efficiency of thermal power generation or nuclear power generation in order to create electricity while using fewer resources and having fewer adverse effects.

The second was to find a new form of energy that had not been focused on up to that point.

In the latter case, it was not too rare for hints to have existed since ancient times. For example, power generation using the excess energy used when people walked on their own two feet was being seriously considered.

Liberal Arts City may have been attempting to develop psychic powers based on a different foundation in a similar way to that.

But that official was wrong about something fundamental at the very beginning.

Saten Ruiko knew because she was part of the science side.

Olive Holiday and Liberal Arts City as a whole had come in contact with something different from psychic powers.

“Xochitl is…” Saten opened her mouth.

However, before she could say what she wanted to say, the official casually moved her hand that was holding her hair and shoved Saten’s face into the seawater. The sudden action made a large amount of seawater enter Saten’s mouth and when she started to choke, the seawater started to enter her nose.

Because of her handcuffed hands, she could not struggle properly.

Her sandal-covered feet slipped on the rocky ground under the water making it difficult to stand, much less kick.

“Let’s…end…this…now…”

She could hear a distorted voice from above the surface. She somehow managed to move her head as she tried to get her head above the surface even if her grasped hair or even scalp was ripped off in the process. In reality, she did not have that much strength and her limit was causing a slight creaking pain in her neck.

For a while, she felt no pain from not being able to breathe.

The surprise caused by the pain of the salt water stinging at her nose and throat may have been winning out.

But at a certain point, the true pain came.

Instead of increasing at an even rate, it quickly shot up like the curve from a quadratic function. Saten’s body thrashed about. Tremendous strength entered her head that was being forced under the seawater. Olive had been holding her with only one hand, but she had to grab Saten’s hair with her other hand to deal with it.

Her arms bound behind her back expanded a surprising amount due to her muscles.

A creaking noise came from what must have been the handcuffs.

But…

(…)

The instant some clear bubbles leaked from her lips, all strength suddenly left Saten’s arms and legs. Her extremities ceased functioning because her body lacked the oxygen needed to move.

Her lips opened.

She could not force out the seawater that came rushing in to fill the gap.

She had been suffering due to the carbon dioxide her own body had produced and once the seawater filled her body, she was wrapped in a feeling different from before.

(…isn’t…)

Saten blankly thought while her eyelids lay half open because she could not even move them freely.

She was merely left with the doubts that had been left at the surface of her consciousness.

(It isn’t psychic powers… It’s something…else…)

Her limbs floated around her.

Saten Ruiko’s life was disappearing.

And then a large amount of the seawater that was causing her suffering was blown away along with an explosive noise.

Something like a bomb had been dropped on the ocean’s surface nearby.

It took quite some time for Saten Ruiko to realize that. The shockwave did not spread only through the air. The shockwave spread through the water and harshly struck Saten’s cheek forcibly calling back her disappearing consciousness. Her body was removed from Olive’s hands and thrown out onto the ocean’s surface.

With her dim consciousness, Saten saw a white line that looked like a contrail.

However, it was much thinner than one from an airplane as if it belonged to a missile.

“Gwaaaahhh!?”

That shout must have come from Olive.

Before Saten could turn her head in that direction, more explosions occurred. They mercilessly destroyed the stone outcropping above their heads and caused a large amount of rock to rain down from above. A missile contrail tore through to the back of the -shaped rocky area and blew up the disguised entrance.

Some falling rocks approached from above Saten as she floated face up, but for some reason a few missiles flew from the side and accurately destroyed the falling objects.

“…”

After lying there blankly for a bit, Saten finally managed to muster up enough strength to stand up on the rocky footing with her sandals. The seawater was at about waist height. She felt a bit sick and put a hand up to her mouth. The seawater must have injured her on the inside because there was a bit of red mixed in.

Olive was nowhere to be seen.

Saten doubted she had run away.

She may have been behind some of the fallen rocks or she may have been crushed and had sunk down to the bottom.

Saten ignored her.

The natural desire to try and rescue the woman did come to her mind.

Her senses seemed numbed as she forced her body to move. She looked around with unnaturally jerky movements and saw one of the flying fish on the edge of the ocean. It was the mysterious craft with a body made of what looked like two wooden canoes and four wings. It went around destroying everything in the area before lowering its speed and slowly approaching Saten.

The top canoe slid backwards like a bivalve. Peering from within was a brown girl wearing a distinctive traditional outfit.

“Xochitl…?” Saten muttered, but the other girl did not respond.

Xochitl left the flying fish and stepped down into the seawater. She then grabbed Saten’s neck with tremendous speed, made a 180 degree turn, and slammed Saten’s back into the side of the flying fish she had been within. Saten’s breathing was stopped once more and Xochitl pulled a blade from her pocket and stuck its tip against Saten’s temple.

“…I thought I told you not to get involved in this. If you were brought here, you must have learned something you shouldn’t have. You did, didn’t you?”

Xochitl seemed to be mad.

Saten did not know why she was mad.

“Xochitl…”

That was why Saten naturally said what she did.

She responded to the question honestly.

“You’re from a different world than us…aren’t you? But they are invading that world… That’s why you’re fighting…isn’t it?”

Saten moved her lips that had gone pale from being exposed to the seawater for such a long time. Her red, bloodshot eyes faced directly forward. Possibly due to slight cyanosis due to her difficulty breathing, all of her skin had turned white-ish.

“They have probably been silencing people like me this whole time… You’re fighting to stop that…aren’t you, Xochitl?”

“Dammit,” Xochitl spat out.

She removed her brown hand from Saten’s neck. Having lost her support, Saten sank back down into the seawater and Xochitl frantically grabbed her arm.

“Liberal Arts City is done for,” said Xochitl. “Xiuhcoatl will soon be on the move. Once it hits here, 87% of the city will be burned away. Everyone, regardless of whether they are the bad ones or not, will sink into the ocean along with the city.”

“Xochitl…?”

“The tunnel for the linear motor train connecting this city to the American mainland has been destroyed. The heliports across the city have been taken out as well. However, Liberal Arts City has plenty of huge lifeboats. There are enough of them to carry out the one million tourists here with room to spare. If you do not want all those people to die, you need to find a way to get those lifeboats running.”

“What do you mean? …What is Xiuhcoatl…?”

“…”

Xochitl did not answer Saten’s question.

Xochitl could tell strength had come back to Saten’s legs, so she let go of the girl’s arm. She then lightly pushed on Saten’s chest moving the girl away from her.

Xochitl spoke as she got back inside the Mixcoatl.

“I can’t tell you everything, but I gave you the hint you need to make the right choice.”

Before Saten could say anything, Xochitl closed the body of the Mixcoatl. The craft made subtle movements to turn away from Saten and then it shot off toward the ocean at high speed away from Saten. Xochitl had said nothing more even as it disappeared from Saten’s sight.

Using the tips of its four wings, the Mixcoatl raced along while floating just above the ocean’s surface.

A different Mixcoatl approached from the side moving almost parallel to Xochitl’s craft. Her comrade named Tochtli was aboard it.

“Did you get your message across?”

“Shut up. I haven’t gone against our mission. Our goal is to completely destroy the information on our techniques that is being analyzed in secret in this city. We weren’t ordered to kill the tourists.”

“Ha ha. That girl is waving at you.”

“…”

Xochitl fell silent.

Suddenly, a number of stealth fighters from the Laveze Squadron assaulted them from the sky. Xochitl and Tochtli’s Mixcoatls moved to the left and right like they had been repelled by each other and they counter attacked in unison while the Laveze Squadron’s judgment was dulled.

“Well, let’s get to our real job,” Tochtli said.

“Sure. If just having them analyze the information on our techniques is enough to bring misfortune to so many people, then we have to stop it.”

Missiles fired from above the sea and from up in the sky mixed together and exploded.

The two Mixcoatls cut through the black smoke and headed once more toward Liberal Arts City.

Chapter 6

The turmoil continued into the night.

Saten Ruiko was sleeping within her room.

She had been found in that rocky area by the sea that had been destroyed by missiles. She seemed to have swallowed a lot of seawater and she must have been relieved to have seen Mikoto and Uiharu who had come for her because she passed out as soon as she saw them.

Shirai Kuroko somehow managed to teleport them all back to the hotel, but the hotel was not exactly functioning properly either. It had not been struck by the Mixcoatl missiles, but all the panicked people out on the roads had wanted to at least escape to somewhere with a roof, so the hotel had more people in it than it was designed to hold. Possibly because of all the people rushing into it at once, the entrances had stopped functioning and the glass automatic doors had been smashed.

Everyone had realized that a tragedy was occurring.

They understood that it was not an attraction and that people’s lives could easily be lost. Because of that, the invisible atmosphere hanging over everyone had turned to one of discomfort.

Mikoto, Shirai, and Uiharu had gathered in the hotel room Saten slept in.

They had no idea how long the hotel would stay in operation and there was a risk of turmoil breaking out within the building given all the people gathered there. They had decided it would be better not to be separated.

“This has gotten bad…” Mikoto muttered.

The night scene that had been visible out the window the previous night was gone. Without all the lights, the darkness covering the sea made its usual eeriness all the more noticeable. Also, the orange lights of flames could be seen in places within the darkness.

It seemed the Mixcoatls had focused their attacks on the public transportation facilities and the airfield for the Liberal Arts City fighters. As such, no one had been directly hit and killed by the missiles despite the great commotion they had caused. However, it seemed the turmoil linked to the attack had left some people injured.

(Really, I thought this was just going to be a field trip that I could enjoy like a vacation. Why did we have to get caught up in this war-like situation?)

Mikoto gritted her teeth.

She heard another girl's voice in her ears.

"I'm not sure we can trust what they say since they try to pass everything off as a show, but it seems Liberal Arts City did not have time to do so with this commotion," Uiharu Kazari said while acquiring information from the network using the IC card charger.

"But this is odd," said Shirai Kuroko as she pulled some fruit from the refrigerator installed in the room. "Why would they leave after only doing a certain level of damage when they had such an advantage? If it was me, I would continue to crush the city without giving them a chance to prepare anymore defenses."

"Shirai-san!"

Uiharu shouted in protest, but Mikoto agreed with Shirai. It was not a game or a competition. It was a true fight to the death, so there was no reason to think about fairness.

Which meant…

"So is the mere destruction of Liberal Arts City not the goal of whoever is piloting those Mixcoatls?"

"Or maybe they could not find their true target, so they had to tearfully turn back to resupply.”

Mikoto was about to give an additional view, but she stopped.

She thought her idea was unlikely. And even if it was possible, she felt the destruction would have come at a sooner stage if it were the case.

(What if they already have the overwhelming force needed to finish this and they could do so whenever they want to…?)

“Yeah, I guess it isn’t that.”

“?”

Mikoto spoke without thinking and Shirai and Uiharu looked at her with confused looks on their faces.

With the Mixcoatls gone, the turmoil within the city started to settle down. However, it was human nature to be full of dissatisfaction once that happened. It hadn’t been the hotel workers’ faults, but a lot of people (some not even people staying at that hotel) flooded to the front desk or grabbed workers in the halls and yelled at them as if trying to tear them apart.

It may have been the attackers’ intention, but fortunately no one had died yet. However, there were some people injured. That led to a very tense atmosphere.

No one knew when the Mixcoatls would be back. On top of that, the undersea tunnel and the heliports had been destroyed, so there was no way to escape the city. It was difficult to remain calm in that kind of situation, but the atmosphere made it feel like even a slight shout could stir up a great disturbance, so it was about as uncomfortable as it could get.

“…It looks like we were right to order room service,” Mikoto said.

After cheering up the exhausted looking hotel worker by giving him a rather large tip, Mikoto and the others ate a late dinner in Saten’s room.

“Since the direct cause of the disturbance, the flying fish, has left, I think everything should calm down given time.”

“Of course, that’s only if the flying fish do not come back tomorrow.”

“…Shirai-san.”

They had ordered a simple dinner centered around beef. The flavor was not bad, but it had the impression of being compacted since the space on the room service cart was limited.

Saten must have smelled the food because she started stirring in the bed. Her eyes slowly opened and she sat up like a child waking up.

“S-Saten-san! Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No, I’m more or less fine…Hm? What you’re eating looks pretty good, Uiharu.”

“Sh-should I really let her have some of this? It’s pretty heavy…” Uiharu said looking over to Mikoto for help. “Why don’t you start with this salad and then move on to the meat if the salad sits well with your stomach?”

“Uiharu, come over here. We only ordered food for three, so let’s reshuffle it all into four portions,” Shirai suggested.

When Shirai tried to secretly move only the food on Mikoto’s plate to her own, she got biri biri-ed and the food was then redistributed evenly.

After they finished eating, Saten started to tell the others what had happened to her.

“Earlier today, I met this strange girl…”

Saten was slowly moving her mouth to explain every little thing.

She had met a girl named Xochitl. That girl was one of the people piloting the Mixcoatls. She had snuck into the hidden part of Liberal Arts City to find out if Xochitl was a bad person or not. She had been found by an official and almost killed to make it look like an accidental drowning. In the end, Xochitl had saved her using a Mixcoatl.

Partway through the story, Mikoto brought her fist down on Saten's head, Shirai did the same, and finally Uiharu did so as well. The path she had gone down was not an adventure. It was like she had pulled the trigger five times in a row in a game of Russian roulette but by pure chance a bullet had not come out. That was how the story sounded to the other three.

Saten suddenly spoke up again as she held the top of her head with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, right. I wonder what she meant when she mentioned Liberal Arts City's lifeboats."

"?"

"Um, the Xochitl girl mentioned them before she left. She said something called…um…Xiuh…coatl? Well, whatever it was, she said it was coming soon, but she didn't explain what she meant. It sounded like she was talking about something different from before. Anyway, she said we needed to use the lifeboats to flee before it came. I don't know how, but apparently Liberal Arts City has some huge lifeboats and the one million tourists can all fit on them."

"Xiuhcotal?"

Mikoto looked puzzled. She was pretty sure the flying fish were called Mixcoatls. Did they have some other kind of craft?

"Lifeboats for a million people? The scale here is as huge as ever…"

"Could she have been referring to these?" said Uiharu from in front of the IC card charger. A few windows were open on the screen.

"In 12 places on Liberal Arts City's coast, 200 meter class highly buoyant ships are stored. Each one can hold about 80,000 people."

"Wait, can a ship like that really hold that many people?"

"Well, they aren't comfortable cruise ships; they're lifeboats. It seems each person only has about a sleeping bag’s worth of space and apparently each of those spaces can function as an independent boat.”

“It can be easy to forget, but we’re 50 kilometers from the American mainland here. Just floating in the ocean won’t be enough to save us.”

They would be surrounded by ocean in every direction, but they would dry up without a single drop of water to drink. It was a frightening thought and those giant lifeboats had been prepared to avoid that situation.

“No specialized knowledge of the boats is needed to use them. They are GPS controlled and will automatically avoid reefs and other boats as they head for the American mainland. However, all that is just to allow them to carry out their function as life boats. They cannot carry out the precise movements needed to dock, so a rescue team would have to save the people onboard.”

The large lifeboats were codenamed Salmon Red. Apparently, the way they held a large number of tiny boats with the people on them made them look like salmons holding their roe.

Mikoto felt that name was ridiculous, but it was hardly the time to complain about something like that.

Uiharu spoke while looking at the screen.

“The ocean around Liberal Arts City is still maintained as the environment of 50 years into the future needed for filming the movie, so something like a net is surrounding the area to prevent fish and other creatures in the ocean from coming and going. However, when the Salmon Reds start moving, that net needs to be torn away. That may be one of the reasons the ships are almost never used.”

Mikoto looked over Uiharu’s shoulder at the charger’s screen.

“But will those lifeboats prevent everyone from sinking along with the city if the Mixcoatls attack again?”

“I’m not sure…” Uiharu looked troubled. “It’s hard to say with just the information on the network, but from the data I have, the runways for the fighters and the other defenses for the city have been taken down below 20%.

Normally, I would think sending out the lifeboats would take priority in a situation like that, but there is no sign of the officials trying to prepare the Salmon Reds.”

“So they intend to fight here to the end…”

According to Saten’s story, some kind of experiments and research were going on there. It was possible those things were keeping them from leaving or they may have decided that putting the fruits of their research on the defenseless lifeboats would be exposing their weak point to the Mixcoatls that could travel as quickly as a fighter jet.

It was not clear what those piloting the Mixcoatls were planning, but it was unlikely to be over. And there was the possible danger of the Xiuhcoatl that the girl named Xochitl had mentioned.

Liberal Arts City and the Mixcoatls had been fighting evenly, but the Mixcoatls had made a clear invasion that day which had greatly changed the situation. If it was all just left to the Laveze Squadron, the city would be destroyed.

Which meant…

(I know what I have to do.)

Misaka Mikoto’s conclusion was a simple one.

She was not an ally of either side.

Hearing Saten’s story made her want to favor Xochitl’s side, but that did not change the fact that both Liberal Arts City and the Mixcoatls were groups that had no problem injuring or even killing people.

As such, Mikoto had to stand between both groups without joining either side and bring an end to the issue without any more sacrifices.

She had to do it because the normal tourists who had come there were going to get truly involved in it all.

(In the worst case, I might end up having to fight both groups at the same time.)

She wanted to give the Mixcoatls a gift of a Railgun blast too, but even if she was going to resort to that kind of force, she had to let the people trapped in Liberal Arts city escape and secure a battlefield she could get a little violent in.

Mikoto turned to Uiharu.

“At any rate, staying within Liberal Arts City is dangerous. If the officials aren’t going to move on their own, we may have to lead the tourists to the Salmon Red lifeboats ourselves.”

“…That could be difficult. The Salmon Reds are one of the city’s secrets. In order to appear to be a safe and comfortable movie city, they do not want to let their emergency lifeboats be seen if they can help it.”

“So if we take the people to the large lifeboats hidden in a secret area, the officials may try to stop us? I guess they might even just fire into the crowd the instant we cross the line into the restricted areas.”

“…But that also means we cannot just leave this to the officials. If we just wait for them, we might end up waiting until the island has already been destroyed.”

Given the situation, it would be better to let all the people board the Salmon Reds.

No one had been killed in the attack earlier that day, but that would not necessarily be true the next time. Liberal Arts City’s defense network had been damaged, so the next attack would be even worse.

However, the officials would not let them simply lead the tourists to the large lifeboats.

(What do we do…?)

Mikoto looked down at the Railgun coin holder strapped to her sandal.

She thought about suppressing the officials so that they could get the Salmon Reds running, but she shook her head. Liberal Arts City did indeed appear weakened due to the damage done by the Mixcoatls, but that was the result of an organization clashing with an organization. An individual like Mikoto clashing with an organization would not necessarily produce the same results.

It was not an issue of the size of their collective firepower.

For example, each of the 12 Salmon Red lifeboats was located in a different location around Liberal Arts City. It was probably impossible for Mikoto to gain control of each of those docks. She would be out of breath just from running around the outside of that city that had a diameter of around 10 kilometers and that was made up of multiple blocks. She also had no idea how many officials were stationed at each dock. Even if she did gain control of one dock, in the time she spent attacking another, other officials would head to the first one making her efforts pointless.

(If only there was some core I could destroy and take care of everything all at once, but I guess things just aren't that convenient.)

The scale was different from defeating some gang of delinquents in a city.

There were indeed some things that could not be resolved just by swinging your arms around and going on a rampage.

And then…

“Wah!?” Uiharu cried out.

Suddenly, the power went out in the room Mikoto and the others were in. The room went completely dark. Of course, the IC card charger Uiharu was using turned off too, so all light in the room disappeared.

“!!”

Mikoto immediately looked out the window.

Lights were sparse in the darkness other than the orange flames, but no entire building had its electricity out. She could see some lights on and some off in the windows making the buildings look like mouths with teeth missing.

That hotel or possibly that room alone had suddenly lost its power.

It was as if someone were forcibly cutting off their access through the computer.

(This timing must mean…!!)

Mikoto immediately pushed down Saten whose silhouette she could make out in the darkness and she dragged Uiharu down onto the floor from her position in front of the charger.

“They’ve noticed us!! Get down!!” she yelled.

Something happened at the exact same time, but it was not the enemy breaking through the window with ropes like in a movie.

It came from the wall to the next room.

The other side must have had explosives stuck to it because with a loud boom the entire wall broke to pieces like it was made of glass.

“Kuroko!” Mikoto shouted.

Multiple rifle barrels were stuck into the room through the destroyed wall. No warnings or threats were given. The men holding the guns merely aimed at every form in the room and unhesitatingly pulled the trigger.

But right before they did, the roof fell down like a shutter. Mikoto had used magnetism to forcibly move the rebar and metal ducts. Mikoto cowered down upon hearing the gunfire, but the great amount of building materials acted as a shield. She fired lightning spears from her bangs. She carefully knocked away each attacker on the other side of the destroyed wall with one shot each.

(Dammit!! I thought their superiors told them not to kill me!)

Mikoto cursed silently, but the environment within Liberal Arts City had greatly changed. The city’s superiors, the ones referred to as management, may have changed their plans.

But there was no point in complaining about that.

Mikoto quietly called out two names in the darkness.

“(…Uiharu-san! Saten-san!!)”

The room had no power, but light was leaking in from the destroyed wall and ceiling. No response came, but she saw two forms squirming on the floor covered in wreckage.

Those two were fine at least.

(Where is Kuroko…!?)

Mikoto continued to hide behind the wreckage while she carefully looked around the area for Shirai.

She heard a slight whoosh.

At that time, Mikoto was hiding behind the wreckage of the ceiling she had brought down. The pile of wreckage was only about as high as her waist, so she was crouching down on the floor.

And then…

Something approached Mikoto’s throat. It was a nonmetal war pick, a type of pickaxe meant for battle that could be held in one hand. The person holding it was circling around the pile of rubble at high speed bringing the war pick’s tip closer. The motion was so quick and smooth that Mikoto realized what was going on reverse order.

Someone was trying to kill her.

As soon as she realized that simple fact, Mikoto finally started to move.

“!!”

Still crouched down, she immediately twisted her body. The approaching war pick slightly tore at the skin of her neck and then stabbed into a gap in the rubble behind her. However, Mikoto fell over onto her back because she had tried to evade so quickly.

The attacker ignored the war pick that was stuck in the rubble and reached around behind him or herself.

The attacker pulled out a nonmetal knife and swung the blade down toward the top of Mikoto’s nose.

However, a great crackling noise rang out.

A high voltage current had been fired from Mikoto's bangs.

Seeing that the attacker had been knocked away, Mikoto breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh right, where's Kuroko…?"

"I am over here," the girl said from the direction of the room's door.

The supposedly locked door had somehow been opened from the outside. Shirai entered through it using both hands to drag along some collapsed men.

"I took out the spare unit. It seems like having Uiharu's hacking discovered brought some unwanted visitors. No matter how skilled she is, she simply stayed connected for too long."

"Uuh," said Uiharu from within the dark room.

Perhaps because Mikoto had knocked them to the ground beforehand, Uiharu and Saten did not have any obvious injuries. Shirai teleported around to make sure no more officials were around, but they had no idea when reinforcements would arrive. Mikoto decided they should get away from that area when…

"…Really, it seems some rather troublesome people have shown up," said someone other than the four Academy City girls within the dark room.

The voice was coming from the direction Mikoto had knocked the attacker who had used the war pick. Mikoto tensed up and Saten started to tremble. They recognized the female voice.

"And we are the ones fighting an evil enemy. Not to mention that Liberal Arts City is filled with people like you."

It was the woman official wearing the racing swimsuit and the lifejacket.

It was Olive Holiday.

When Mikoto stared into the darkness, she saw that Olive had bandages covering her body in places as she leaned against the half-destroyed bed. According to Saten, she had sunk down among the rubble when the Mixcoatl fired its missiles, but…

“An evil enemy…?” muttered Saten Ruiko.

The trembling girl tightly clenched her small fists and stared at Olive.

“You interfered with Xochitl and the others and continually did strange things in secret and whenever it looked like you were going to be found out, you tried to use violence to solve it!! So how can you call them evil!?”

“We are merely doing what we must as the world police.”

Olive’s expression did not change even while being the target of such clear anger.

Something red oozed from the bandages on various parts of her body.

“We must do more than just protect the world as it is. We also need to deal with the various dangers that will occur in the world ten years or even a hundred years from now.”

“What does that have to do with secretly researching psychic powers!?” yelled Saten.

She had a feeling that the power Xochitl and the others used was different from psychic powers, but at the very least, Liberal Arts City had decided they were the same and were trying obtain something from them.

“The problem is Japan’s Academy City.”

“…Don’t tell me you think we’re planning on using military force to take over the world or something,” Mikoto warned, but Olive shook her head.

“I’m sure you are not planning anything so childish. However, Japan’s Academy City is said to have technology 20 or 30 years ahead of the rest of the world. Do you understand what that means? In just 20 or 30 years, the entire world could be like that.”

“…”

“Psychic powers are no exception. Seven Level 5s have appeared within Academy City, but if espers spread to entire population of 6 billion, how many monsters do you think will be on the loose? Doesn’t it seem like a new age of wars will begin that cannot be controlled by monitoring the circulation of guns and other weapons?”

In reality, a Level 5 was not something that appeared so easily. The number of them could not be calculated as a statistical percentage like that. However, Olive would likely not accept that even if Mikoto explained it to her. Only people from Academy City like Mikoto who had truly experienced psychic powers could truly understand that fact.

However, it was true that Level 3 powers may become common after 20 or 30 years.

The future could not be predicted like that.

People from an older time had not known what a convenience store was and they would never have been able to imagine a cell phone. However, those things were used by everyone as if they were normal. They had become a basic part of the world.

In that case…

“We have our duty as the world police,” Olive said proudly. “We must not be left behind by the flow of time. If we fail to guide things properly, the world will be filled with unnecessary turmoil. The various types of problems that we have just barely managed to keep under control will erupt into conflicts all at once.”

New dangers of a new era.

Problems that had not existed before espers.

The world police felt they were the cornerstone to fighting those things in the future. They took the initiative and fought in countries and areas with no direct connection to themselves for the sake of ensuring peace.

After thinking through all that, Mikoto laughed.

That idea was just so stupid that it made her laugh.

“That’s no reason for this.”

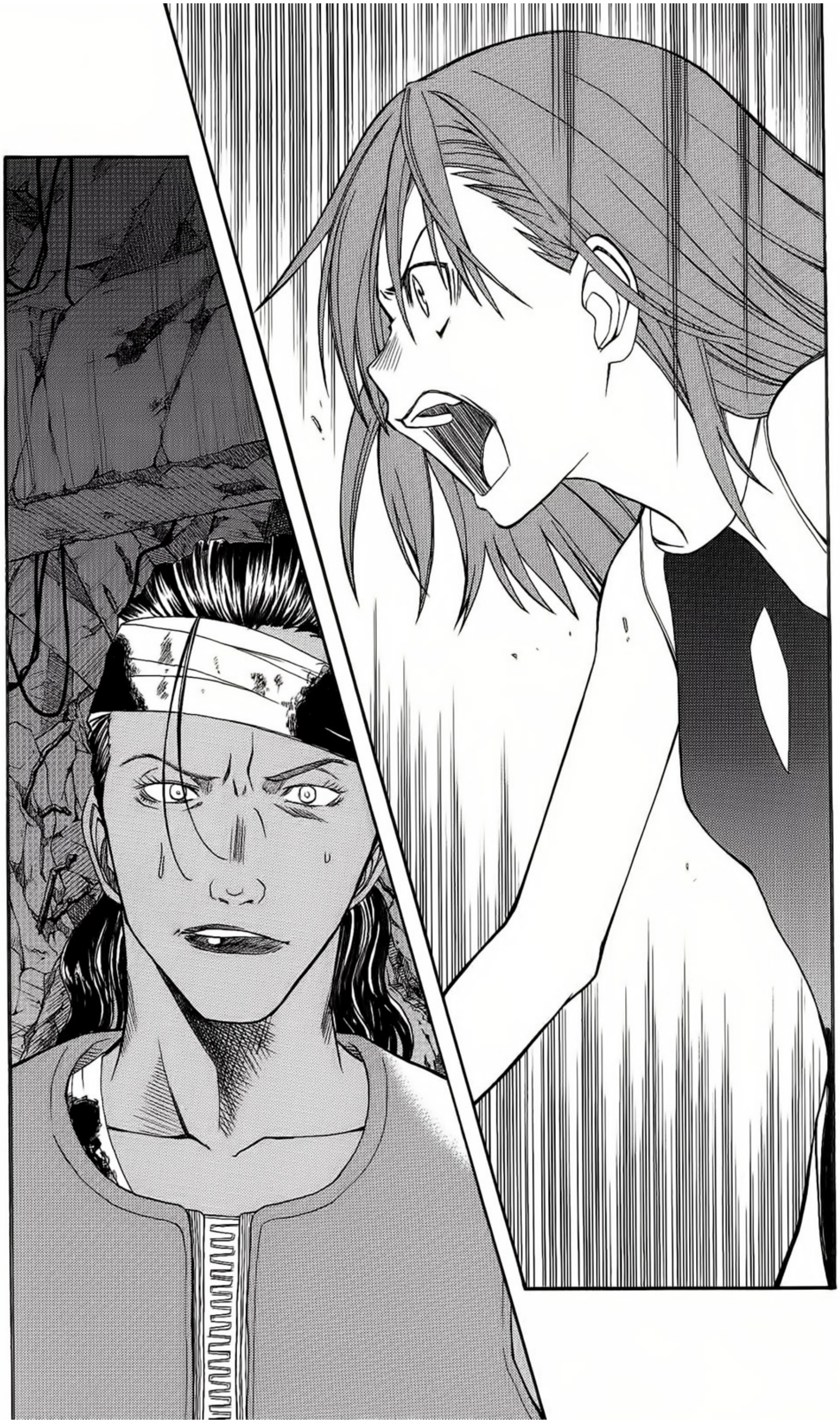
Hearing those words, Olive looked at Mikoto.

Mikoto continued regardless.

“That’s no reason to kidnap people, to shoot those who get in your way, or to try to silence Saten-san.”

“It is necessary,” Olive laughed scornfully at Mikoto’s words. “We have no choice if we are to continue to maintain control as the world police.”

“Screw that.” With a crackling noise, bluish-white sparks flew from Mikoto’s bangs. “No one has asked you to keep doing these things. The people of the world are fighting in their own respective worlds. You don’t understand that, so you end up coming in with a bulldozer and destroying it all!!”



Mikoto's tone got stronger as she continued speaking.

The anger stored up in her heart was being released.

“If you want to develop psychic powers, then just do it!! Just make some institution for that that’s even better than Academy City if you want to!! How did that desire turn into this? You don’t need to solve every problem in the fastest possible way. You’ve become an organization that controls everything from the top by using incoming problems to your own advantage and by hiding every little thing that’s inconvenient for you!”

Shirai, Uiharu, and Saten averted their gaze upon hearing Mikoto’s words.

She was Academy City’s #3 Level 5.

Her words were not directed simply at the official named Olive.

They may have been something like a small child’s request for the world of adults.

“It’s true that Academy City is not a completely clean organization. And yes, espers do cause problems. But espers in and of themselves are not a type of calamity!! They aren’t some existence that you need to take the initiative to seal away!! They aren’t a problem that you need to resolve so badly that you need to put normal people in danger over it!!”

Mikoto’s tone then grew weaker.

She put as much strength into her hands as she could and slowly spoke.

“Can’t you at least understand that much…? Can’t you think for yourself and realize that you can do something without resorting to violence?”

“…”

Olive’s lips moved slightly.

However, the words that came from within were not the ones Mikoto had been hoping for.

“The situation…has changed.”

Her voice was cracking.

However, there was no trembling in her voice.

Mikoto’s words had not reached her.

“We are being attacked. This is no longer a situation where we can handle it by using the interception unit. This has gotten to the point where no one can predict who will be defeated next time.”

Her words supported what Mikoto had vaguely suspected.

Liberal Arts City was truly in trouble.

“That kind of nice reasoning will do nothing but get the island destroyed.”

All the damage Olive had taken must have caught up with her because her body wobbled. She had already been leaning up against the bed, but now she slowly collapsed to the floor. She smiled all the way down. She never once agreed with what Mikoto had said.

Mikoto looked down at Olive like she was looking at something she could not stand.

“…”

Previously, Olive Holiday had said that the city was the headquarters for the officials and that they had all the materials prepared needed to succeed in an attack if one was needed. However, that attack had failed. In other words, Liberal Arts City was not perfect.

Mikoto had been saved by that fact, but it did not give her any hope.

If the city was weakened, it meant they had lost the ability to repel the threat of the Mixcoatls.

The number of people that could fight was limited.

Also, Misaka Mikoto was one of the seven Level 5s of Japan’s psychic powers development institution, Academy City.

After remaining still for some time, Mikoto finally shook off her hesitation and headed for the exit of the hotel room.

Saten blankly watched her and then hurriedly spoke.

“Wh-where are you going?”

“To the large lifeboats. I’m going to do something about this.”

After saying only that, Mikoto left the room.

Even if most of the facilities had been destroyed, there were probably plenty of officials left. She could not go around defeating every single one of them. There were simply too many.

However, the officials would not want to waste their numbers. After all, the Mixcoatls would definitely be back. They had no idea if they could fight properly in their current state, so they would have an even harder time of fighting their true enemy if they lost any more of their fighting force.

(…So I’ll aim for that.)

Mikoto walked along the hotel hallway and pulled the coin holder from the strap on her sandal.

(The main force for fighting the Mixcoatls is the Laveze Squadron. If I destroy a few of the remaining runways or hangars, it should get their attention.)

After that, she would make a deal allowing the tourists to use the Salmon Red lifeboats.

Even if she could not defeat all of the officials, it was not too difficult to destroy immobile facilities.

At the same time in a different part of Liberal Arts City, the five men and women known as management sat with their bodies sinking deeply into comfortable chairs. Their council room was extremely spacious for a room to be used by only five people.

Management was discussing in what way Liberal Arts City should move from then on.

That giant institution controlled the resources for a large entertainment industry and it could have an effect on financial markets around the world. However, those five did not look for the opinions of others when deciding how the city should move.

They did not need to.

Not because they could resolve any problem instantly, but because there was no need for them to discuss their plans or intentions with the related organizations.

Dealing with that kind of trivial matter was not their job.

Even if it was necessary, they did not have to do it themselves.

They had hired people to carry out such things.

People had been fighting outside in Liberal Arts City, the Laveze Squadron had been damaged, they had learned anew what the Mixcoatls were capable of, and some tourists had been injured when some facilities had been destroyed, but they did not need to pay any of that any heed.

After all, someone would do something about it.

It was absolutely impossible for them to be truly cornered. Management's job was just to walk down the path of success and it was the duty of those around them to make the effort needed to carry that out.

This was because the world needed management.

However, the 5 members of management were in utter shock over the response they received over the satellite connection they were just barely managing to maintain.

Their project had been completely frozen.

They were to destroy all the necessary data and have all the personnel escape.

“What is going on…?” someone said.

All of them were thinking the same thing.

Management had been in communication with the military on the American mainland. Liberal Arts City was at the disadvantage so they had requested assistance from the world’s greatest army that had given meaning to the term “world police”.

And that had been the response they had received.

“The research we are carrying out here is greatly advantageous to America as a whole. I see no reason to destroy the data. Why will the military not act on our behalf…?”

Did the military think that taking action would damage the tourists in the city as well? All five members of management felt that was a ridiculous reason. If one thought of the value given to each individual civilian, it was at a level where they could easily be ignored.

Or were they afraid of destroying the main research facility in Liberal Arts City by mistake? That was more realistic, but it was still odd. If they felt the research was important, they would not have frozen the project or told them to destroy the data. They would have at least told them to bring the fruits of their research back with them to the American mainland. Research data would normally not be sent over the network out of fear of it being hacked, but there were other ways of getting it to the mainland.

It did not make sense.

That was why every member of management was confused.

“Why won’t the military comply with our request?”

It was true that the Mixcoatls were powerful. They had thought they were fighting evenly up to that point, but the city had been so easily overwhelmed and they had been forced to go on the defensive. There was no denying the Mixcoatls’ strength.

However, it was not their job to know exactly how to resolve that problem.

Things such as true fear were not needed for management.

According to the tedious reports their subordinates had sent them, the Laveze Squadron was the center of Liberal Arts City’s defenses, but a certain level of damage had been done in the previous attack to the runways and servicing facilities needed to keep using the Laveze Squadron.

“It is true that the frequency of attacks has been rising significantly recently,” said someone within management, “but is it really enough for the entire nation of America to draw back?”

No. Thinking of the value of the research being carried out there, they should want to protect Liberal Arts City even if it turned into a long drawn-out war. Liberal Arts City had a special position within America. That large institution was seen as necessary for America. The leaders of the military and the senators would not abandon the city easily.

Which meant…

“They’re being pressured,” said someone else. “Someone is applying enough pressure from the side to overcome our influence.”

When they thought about it, that was the only answer, but they could not think of anyone who had enough influence to crush a request from management. No, there were actually a few people within America who were more powerful than management, but all those people were directly benefited by Liberal Arts City. They would not go out of their way to crush their request.

What had happened?

Just as every member of management was thinking on that same question, they heard a slight bit of static.

Normally, an outside line could not directly connect via the satellite. A secretary-like operator would be contacted first and management would need to give their permission before the line was put through to them.

This connection ignored all that.

An impudent voice reached managements ears.

“You seem to be troubled.”

With just that short sentence, every single member of management’s faces twisted into the exact same expression at the exact same time. The expression was one of displeasure.

They recognized that voice.

It belonged to someone who could greatly influence the world even more than management.

That person was the head of Japan’s psychic powers development institution, Academy City.

He was Board Chairman Aleister.

“You seem to be having some difficulties with some attacks from an unknown enemy. If you like, we could send some reinforcements.”

Upon hearing that, all of their thoughts moved in the same direction.

With that proposal and with that timing, Aleister had to have been the one who had prevented the American air force from sending reinforcements. They didn’t know how he had done it, but he must have. It was not normal for any Japanese aircraft to take military actions in American territory. Quite a bit of preliminary preparations had to be carried out before that could even be said as a joke.

“Don’t tell me,” said one of the members of management, “that you are the one behind these incidents. I do not think those Mixcoatls are made from normal scientific technology. We were thinking of using them because we thought they were different from the kind of things Academy City uses. But if they are yours…”

“Of course they are not,” Aleister said in an unconcerned voice.

There was no sign of him being surprised at being distrusted.

“But it is true that you have come into contact with one of the truths of the world."

"Truths?"

"You could also call it an agreement. At any rate, *there is a world that the likes of you cannot understand*."

He was completely speaking down to them.

Clear hate wrapped around the five members of management who had somehow managed to be given special privileges within the country of the world police.

"Oh, right. I have a question for you," said Aleister ignoring the awkward silence as if to say it was worthless. "If Liberal Arts City itself were to be turned to scraps floating in the sea, would you be able to play that off as a show?"

District 23 of Japan's Academy City specialized in research in the aviation and space industries. It had countless runways prepared both large and small. In one area of runways, a number of 100-meter airplanes were lined up.

They were HsB-02s, Academy City's supersonic stealth bombers.

Those monstrous planes could fly through the air at over 7000 kph, so they could reach America from Japan in just under 2 hours.

Those giant bombers were being filled with various types of explosives including special bombs that could destroy facilities deep within the earth and bombs called synchronous multilayer bombs that would utterly destroy only the area designated. That equipment was a variation known as Style 3. With just that, they could utterly annihilate something like a manmade island.

"…So the time has finally come to use this stuff," said a young mechanic working on one of the bombers. The pilot sipping cold coffee next to him responded coldly.

"I don't think something on Level A Standby will be sent out so easily."

"Well, yeah, but…"

“You put that thing on the nose of the plane, right? From the briefing I received, apparently that’s a prototype AIM sensor. It can detect the location of a specific esper within the wide bombing area.”

“So the plan is to precisely bomb while avoiding the areas with the students?”

“That would be nice.” The pilot must not have been able to stand the flavor of the coffee because he flipped the cup upside down and poured the remaining drink onto the asphalt. “Given the performance of the sensor and the height from which we’ll be bombing, only an exceedingly strong and characteristic AIM diffusion field will be detectable. I’d say only something in the Level 5 class.”

“Wait, but that means…”

“I’m pretty sure there’s one of them down there. It seems they want to at least recover the most valuable one, but they don’t seem to care about the others. And even if we could detect all of the espers by their AIM diffusion fields, what about the teachers leading the trip there? Only the esper students emit AIM diffusion fields. …The higher ups clearly have no intention of saving all the others.” The pilot lightly shook the empty cup. “Just pray that fucking alarm doesn’t ring.”

Chapter 7

The sky was blue.

Seeming to ignore the swirling emotions of all the people, the weather was completely clear. The light rising above people's heads early that morning was so clear and bright that it made one forget that it was September.

Along the border between America and Mexico near the shore of the Pacific Ocean was the front line base of the organization named Return of the Winged One which had its main base in Central America.

In modern terms, it was something like an aircraft carrier. They had bought an old large tanker and loaded it with lots of Mixcoatls. As a disguise, a pile of iron ore lay on top of the flat metal sheet that was easily over 200 meters long, but anyone within Return of the Winged One knew that their ultimate weapon lay beneath that ore.

"Xiuhcoatl, hm?"

Xochitl stood on one end of that large metal sheet. With the sun shining on her brown skin, she looked up at the pile of iron ore that was many times taller than she was.

Next to her stood another girl.

She was Tochtli, Xochitl's colleague.

"Apparently, the preparations are finally complete, so it can truly be activated. Now we can blow that damn research facility to smithereens. Really, this would have been so much easier if we could have done this from the beginning."

"Yes, it's too bad Liberal Arts City stole the spiritual item needed to act as a key. …Well, at least it's unlikely they were able to analyze how it worked."

As Xochitl spoke bluntly, she stared up somewhere in the sky.

Tochtli smiled while looking at her.

“Are you worried?”

“About what?”

“That girl.”

“…”

“With this thing, we can’t aim precisely. Liberal Arts City will just be turned to wreckage on the sea.”

“So?” Xochitl spat out as if she were shaking off her hesitation. “I gave her the hints she needed to make the right decision.”

A clunk sounded as the heavy metal sheet started to move.

Multiple alarms started ringing.

“They have begun to move due to the spiritual item! They’re moving, so get out of the way!!”

All of the Return of the Winged One members working on the metal sheet moved away from the pile of ore. As they watched, the black pile collapsed. With a horribly rough noise, majestic faces peered from within.

The giant weapons were over 100 meters long.

They were Return of the Winged One’s trump card.

They were Xiuhcoatl.

Like a large serpent writhing about atop the pile of ore, the four trump cards were raised up diagonally by remote control and peered down at the ocean’s surface. As she watched them, Xochitl frowned.

Flave and Over were working on Liberal Arts City’s number three short runway.

“…So how many usable ones are left?”

“Numbers 3, 5, 7, and 8. ..It seems that electrical princess really does want to make a deal. She left only the runways that could truly be used.”

“Hey, but didn’t she blow up the hangars with something like lightning?”

“She only did that to the maintenance buildings. The buildings with actual fighters in them weren’t even scratched. You can tell she was being considerate. …It makes me wonder if she’s really an enemy.”

“Oh, do you like strong girls?”

“I hate all kids.”

The two pilots continued their offhand conversation as their fighters were towed out of the hangar. The Laveze Squadron fighters were based off of F-35s, but their additional equipment made their VTOL functionality almost entirely unusable. They used a short runway of about 700 meters to take off.

Flave spoke while looking at the uniquely-shaped stealth fighter.

“…Do you know what that princess wanted?”

“She wants all the unrelated tourists and workers to be allowed to leave on the Salmon Red lifeboats. It’s a pretty broad request. Apparently, she even wants us to board them if possible.”

“Does she really think that’s possible? Those Mixcoatls can exceed Mach 2. It’s obvious what would happen if we were just floating in the ocean in those slow ships.”

“Yes, protecting those large lifeboats in this situation may indeed be difficult.” Over toyed with the dog tags around his neck. “But it’s also a good chance to test my pride.”

“You do like strong girls, don’t you?”

Suddenly, static came from the radio placed on a nearby folding chair.

The operator’s voice reached their ears.

“Mixcoatls have been detected 20 kilometers east of the city!!”

“…Time for work.”

“And they’ve appeared in a position that cuts us off from the American mainland.”

With small smiles on their faces, Flave and Over reached over to their flight helmets.

A great gap in firepower had been created by the damage they had taken the other day. With the armaments they had on hand, they were clearly at the disadvantage. Even so, they ran over to the fighters filled with bombs and missiles that were lined up on one portion of the runway.

“The world police, huh?”

“I’m already getting used to the term, but it isn’t a bad one.”

“Everyone, please hurry.”

An announcement in English flowed through Liberal Arts City.

The woman’s voice was coming from the countless large and small televisions scattered throughout the city.

“A major fault in the structure of Liberal Arts City’s foundation has been discovered. Due to continually receiving large waves with an average of over 7 meters for a long period of time, the manmade beaches are in danger of being washed away into the ocean all at once. Depending on the specific situation, the entire manmade island could be destroyed as a result.”

There was no video.

It may have been because only the bare minimum of a transmission could be maintained, but the screen was black. Using only the speakers, the polite announcement continued.

“A few hours ago, a tropical cyclone appeared at a point 40 kilometers southwest of Liberal Arts City. There is a danger of it becoming a hurricane.”

Those in their hotel rooms, those playing on the beaches, and those shopping in the malls heard the announcement in various ways from the large exhibition screens on the walls of buildings to the small monitors of their cell phones.

“There is a possibility that this hurricane would damage Liberal Arts City’s foundation, but there is no guarantee that would capsize the island even then. However, the lifeboats will be leaving in two hours. Anyone who chooses to leave for the mainland should hurry as quickly as they can. As for the various locations of the Salmon Red lifeboats…”

After reading through the entire script, the blonde-haired, huge-breasted genius girl Beverly Seethrough turned off the microphone.

“Was that good?”

“Yes, thank you. We know we should not have gotten you involved in this, but Saten-san and I cannot speak English…”

Uiharu bowed in thanks.

They were in a management office for the officials on one of the beaches. Normally, the facility would be used for lifeguard-like duties of ensuring the safety of the swimmers, but none of the officials were there. It seemed most of the personnel had been sent out for the battle.

Uiharu had used the computer there to hack into the local cable broadcast in order to make that pirate broadcast over the city’s televisions.

The other girl there, Saten Ruiko, looked out the office’s window.

“But I hope everyone heads to the lifeboats after hearing that…”

“Yes. No matter how many times we send that out, it will be meaningless if they do not believe it,” agreed Uiharu in a worried voice.

However, Beverly puffed her chest up proudly.

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

“?”

“Miss unfashionable flower print one piece, you couldn’t tell because you don’t know English, but I did not read off the script verbatim. I rearranged it as I saw fit and ad-libbed some of it.”

“Y-you did?”

Uiharu looked puzzled because she was not quite sure what Beverly meant.

“Yes,” Beverly nodded. “It’s important to remember that I’m a film director. I’m an expert in the techniques needed to make a work that draws in viewers, secures them, and remains in their hearts. In other words,” she paused for a second, “there is no one out there whose heart I did not grasp with the words I came up with.”

A tremendous roar made the windows shake.

Uiharu and Saten’s eyes widened in shock as they saw all the men, women, adults, and children that had been on the beach running in the same direction. Their faces were anything but calm. In fact, they seemed quite panicked as they ran as quickly as they could.

“The trick is not to force them. If you leave the final decision up to them, it robs them of the ability to just optimistically assume someone will do something about it. Once you create an implied divide between the group that will be saved and the group that will not, they will want to be in the winning group. This method is especially effective in America.”

The officials who had been on the beach yelled something.

The officials had not publicly announced the existence of the Salmon Red lifeboat docked there. They would not be willing to let all those tourists in, so they would likely try to stop them. However, those efforts were pointless. When that many people were charging in a single direction, there was no way of stopping them.

Saten’s mouth flapped open and closed.

“Wah wah wah wah wah!! This has gotten out of hand!!”

“Okay, one more push. …Kyaaahhh!! The asphalt is cracking!!”

“Beverly-san, that’s too much!! With the provocation from that scream, the officials are being swallowed up!!”

Uiharu was worried that they might use riot control guns, but they were at the disadvantage against the Mixcoatls and Mikoto had already gone on her rampage. Mikoto had suggested the announcement strategy because she had doubted they would waste their precious fighting force on something like that.

They might deal with an intruder or two, but intruders numbered in the tens of thousands were a different story altogether.

The Salmon Red lifeboats were in classified areas, but those areas had little to do with the research Liberal Arts City was doing on psychic powers development using a different system from Academy City. If they compromised when it came to the lifeboats, they would not need to fight the crowds of people, so they were unlikely to put up a thorough resistance.

At any rate, it seemed Beverly’s skills as a film director had succeeded in grasping the hearts of the tourists across Liberal Arts City. In that case, Uiharu and the others had no reason to stay there.

“Okay, Saten-san. You too, Beverly-san. We need to head for the nearest lifeboat.”

Saten voiced her agreement, but no one heard it.

The tremendous roar of a fighter engine drowned out her voice.

Their eardrums shook. Saten covered her ears with her hands and crouched on the ground while Beverly looked out the window with tears in her eyes. Uiharu looked outside, too. Fighters were continuously cutting across the blue sky as they flew at low altitude after taking off from the runways.

Uiharu spoke to Beverly as she lent a hand to Saten who was still crouching down on the ground.

“Hurry to the lifeboat!! We have no idea when the battle will reach the city!!”

“Y’know, I now know that isn’t a show, but I still haven’t been told who is attacking and from where.”

Beverly seemed to want something in return for her help, but they did not have time to explain everything there. In fact, it was doubtful if the concept of psychic powers development using a different system from Academy City could be explained easily to someone from outside Academy City.

At any rate, they had to think about ensuring their safety first, so Uiharu pulled on Saten’s arm and left the management office along with Beverly.

Finally, Saten said something.

“I wonder if Xochitl is coming…”

Misaka Mikoto stood on the beach with her sandal-covered feet. As she watched the explosions and water spray visible near the ocean’s horizon, she gritted her teeth.

“It’s already started!?”

Almost all of the tourists and general workers in the city were in the process of boarding the Salmon Red lifeboats positioned at 12 points around Liberal Arts City. The ships would be able to leave soon, but it would be of no use if the route to the American mainland was cut off.

The Salmon Reds were large, but they were still basically lifeboats. They moved automatically according to the GPS in order to take the shortest route and they were only loaded with the bare minimum of supplies needed for that. There was simply no way of avoiding the battlefield by heading to Hawaii or Guam instead.

“The boats cannot move until that is over,” said Shirai Kuroko while staring into the distance with one hand above her eyes. “Well, let’s think positively. At least, it will be easier to fight now that the city isn’t overflowing with people. Even if the Mixcoatls come charging in here, there will be no one injured."

"True…"

Mikoto looked back toward Shirai.

The girl was wearing her sexy swimsuit as usual, but she was now wearing something like a fluorescent jacket over it and its front was completely closed. It was most likely a piece of equipment for the officials. From what Mikoto could see of the fabric, it seemed to be resistant to blades to a certain extent.

"Wouldn't you have more protection if you used all the equipment?"

"…If I was dressed like that, I would collapse from heat stroke."

"I see," Mikoto responded. "Where are Uiharu-san and Saten-san?"

"They have already headed for one of the Salmon Reds. More importantly, what should we do? Is there anything we can do from here before the Mixcoatls get here?"

The truth was that they could not really do anything from where they were.

Mikoto's Railgun only had a range of 50 meters and Shirai's attacks using teleportation could only reach about 80 meters away. They could not get involved with the battle occurring near the horizon.

And then…

"I have no obligation to tell you this, but it's an emergency…" said a woman's voice.

Mikoto and Shirai turned around to find Olive Holiday standing there in her usual racing swimsuit and lifejacket. Her body must have been hurting from her repeated battles because there were bandages wrapped around her in various places and her face was looking a bit pale.

Olive was holding a small radio on her hand.

"I can't stand requesting your help, but we have no other choice."

“Enough with the intro,” Mikoto said to cut her off. “What is it?”

“New enemy crafts are approaching from 30 kilometers to the west of the city. That’s the complete opposite direction. They may have advanced stealth capabilities or the ability to dive under the water because they made it around there without us noticing.”

Mikoto’s eyes widened in shock and she looked back at Olive’s face.

“W-wait! What about your fighters!?”

“We are sending some of the Laveze Squadron to intercept them, but they’re coming from the complete opposite direction…” Olive trailed off there for a second. “Our PAC-3 surface-to-air missiles were destroyed by the Mixcoatls the other day and our remaining firepower is at its limit dealing with the enemy to the east. At this rate, they’ll fly right in and destroy a few of the stationary Salmon Reds on the west side of the city.”

Those large ships were currently having a large number of tourists and workers board them. They could not be sent out right away, but it would also be difficult to have all those aboard evacuate from them. There were simply too many people. If those ships were attacked…

There was no need to think about what would happen then.

Mikoto merely looked her partner in the eyes and called her name.

“Kuroko!!”

In response, Shirai grabbed Mikoto’s hand and they disappeared via teleportation.

Her teleportation could only travel about 80 meters at a time, but she could teleport again upon reaching each point allowing her to quickly travel long distances. If you converted it into a traditional measurement of speed, it would probably be over 200 kph.

“Maybe the reason you aren’t getting enough exercise is because you always rely on your power like this.”

“Fgn!?”

Mikoto’s unnecessary comment made Shirai’s mental state a bit unstable, but she somehow managed to retain control over her power. They continued on and cut across the 10 kilometer diameter of the island in around 3 minutes.

Unlike the eastern coast they had been looking at before, the western coast had lots of pillar-like objects sticking up from the ocean surface. They were giant lights and they were lined up at even intervals across the area. Shirai spoke while looking at that mysterious scenery that headed with even intervals beyond the horizon.

“…Is this another piece of intentionally created scenery? This place was originally created to have the same look as an SF movie.”

It may have been that and it may have been created later, but they did not have time to worry about that.

Mikoto headed for the lifeguard platform installed on the beach. She used the binoculars there to see farther than she could with her eyes alone.

“What is that…?” she muttered in surprise.

She was not looking to the horizon.

She was looking into the sky.

A giant object that was blurry due to the air was visible at such a distance that it should not have been visible given that the earth was round. How high up was it? How fast was it moving? It was so far away, she could not tell. It was the same as how it was hard to tell how fast a large passenger plane flying overhead was moving.

At any rate, the Mixcoatls they had been fighting up to that point were nothing compared to that.

It was probably their true attack.

She could not allow it to make it to Liberal Arts City.

While staring into the distance, Mikoto asked Shirai a question.

“Kuroko, can you travel over there along those decorative pillars?”

And so, Mikoto and Shirai headed out over the ocean.

Because of the unstable footing, Shirai wrapped her arms around Mikoto’s waist to make absolutely sure that she did not let go between teleportations.

Mikoto left the travelling to Shirai and looked back. She could see black smoke.

The only parts of Liberal Arts City she could see at that distance were the large structures like the giant buildings and rollercoaster tracks, but the smoke was more noticeable. She could see it rising up from various places staining the blue sky.

At about 15 kilometers from the island where the fine net sectioning off the living things within and without was, the line of decorative pillars suddenly ended. However, there were mine-like buoys floating beyond the pillars. Those buoys must have been equipment for Liberal Arts City’s research. The two girls travelled along them moving further and further out.

After heading another 7 kilometers out, they could see the entire form of the giant weapon.

The long, narrow craft flying through the sky was over 100 meters long.

It was fundamentally the same as the Mixcoatls in that it was made of wood, cloth, and obsidian. Its body looked like a rugby ball that someone had forcibly stretched from either side. It had large and small wings on the sides and back, but they seemed to ignore the laws of aerodynamics. It looked like a giant fish swimming through the sky.

And there was more than one.

Three more of the things could be seen flying behind the one Mikoto and Shirai were looking at.

There were four of the giant weapons in total.

“Is this the Xiuhcoatl thing Saten-san mentioned?”

If so, they absolutely could not allow them to reach Liberal Arts City. Mikoto had no idea what kind of attack they were capable of, but from what Saten had heard from the girl named Xochitl, they held tremendous power.

“Onee-sama!!”

Shirai’s shout brought Mikoto back to her senses.

That was not the time to get caught up in thought.

The Xiuhcoatl ship was much faster than it had appeared from the distance and before Mikoto knew it, it had passed by over her head. Even the second and third ones were about 50 meters past.

Mikoto finally reacted to the final one.

While looking up at the giant form cutting through the sky at about 100 kph, Mikoto pulled out the coin holder strapped to her sandal. She spoke to Shirai who was her means of transportation.

“Head back! I need to shoot them down! With your speed, you should be able to catch up!!”

“Well, I’ll take that to mean you trust me,” replied Shirai while closing one eye.

Suddenly, both of them disappeared.

Mikoto and Shirai travelled at tremendous speed along the buoys floating in the ocean. They caught up to the last Xiuhcoatl in no time at all and Mikoto flicked a coin from the coin holder with her thumb while Shirai was still wrapped around her waist.

(Its altitude is about 50 meters…That’s just barely in range!!)

Mikoto gritted her teeth, moved her thumb, and fired the Railgun. As the coin flew through the air at three times the speed of sound, friction caused it to glow orange making an orange line through the air.

With a slight delay, a great noise exploded out.

Because she had fired at an angle rather than from directly below, the coin melted and disappeared just before it struck the Xiuhcoatl ship. Even so, the melted remains just barely reached it. One of the wings made of cloth and obsidian on the side was forcibly torn off.

Mikoto clicked her tongue.

“Kuroko, we’re still too far away here! Get right below it somehow!!”

Suddenly, a great light was emitted from the side of the Xiuhcoatl that had its wing torn off. The source of the crimson glow was flames. However, it was not simply fire. It looked more like a great amount of a thick burning liquid was being scattered about.

Like water coming from a fire truck’s hose, it was not being emitted in an accurate trajectory.

As if a giant hammer was falling down toward them, an amorphous red mass about 20 meters across fell toward Mikoto and Shirai’s heads.

“!?”

Shirai was the one that reacted.

With her arms still wrapped around Mikoto’s waist, she travelled across the buoys one after another. The giant hammer of flames struck the ocean, but it did not disappear even as it evaporated a large amount of water. The sea of flames spread out as if it were going to cover up the entire ocean’s surface.

“What is that!? Are they scattering fuel oil around or something!?”

However, they had no time to be surprised.

The Xiuhcoatl with its wing destroyed may have decided to seriously try to eliminate Mikoto and Shirai because the same type of crimson mass was released from eight points on the sides of the craft. The blue sky was covered up many times over and the flames spread across the ocean’s surface as they landed. Mikoto and Shirai were running out of places to flee to.

They were going to be trapped before long.

“Above!!” Mikoto yelled out of irritation.

Shirai immediately grasped what she meant.

She was not limited to horizontal movements with her teleportations. As if she were passing straight through the falling masses of flames Shirai travelled into the sky while still holding Mikoto.

They landed on another one of the wings coming from the side of the Xiuhcoatl.

The openings from which the flames had come turned toward them.

Mikoto took it as something like a human turning around in surprise, but she did not hold back.

An arcade coin was already on top of her right thumb.

An explosive noise rang out.

The Xiuhcoatl was torn in two and Mikoto and Shirai headed for their next target.

Uiharu Kazari was in an eastern area of Liberal Arts City.

She had not yet boarded one of the Salmon Red lifeboats. She was using a maintenance computer to hack into the network that was starting to fall apart. She was using the security cameras to see if there was anyone who had not managed to escape.

She may have been doing it out of a sense of justice or a sense of duty or she may have been doing it because she did not like the idea of simply boarding the large lifeboat while leaving everything to Mikoto and Shirai. Whatever the reason, Uiharu continued working while the distant explosions caused her fingertips to vibrate.

“Uiharu! We need to get onboard soon!!”

“Just a bit longer…Saten-san, you get on before me!”

“Uiharu!! Dah! C’mon!!”

Saten Ruiko was waiting for Uiharu while stamping her feet in frustration. Uiharu thought the girl was a truly good friend.

(Everything’s fine here…and here…and here… As for inside the hotels…the individual rooms don’t have cameras, so I can’t check there…but they should be fine. The workers reported that they already checked through all of them. That leaves…)

After 5 minutes, she had checked all of the important areas. There did not seem to be anyone who had not escaped yet. It pained her to have to leave the armed officials she saw around, but it didn’t seem there was anything left for Uiharu to wait around for.

“Uiharu! C’mon, hurry!!”

“O-okay.”

Urged on by Saten’s words, Uiharu started to leave the computer.

But then she froze.

She turned back toward the computer. She heard Saten tearing at her hair, but there was no time to worry about that. Her fingers raced across the keyboard, but she could not get the information she was after. According to Saten’s story, what she was thinking of should be in the most secure area. That meant the information may not be saved in a place where it could be accessed over the network.

Uiharu moved away from the computer and grabbed Saten’s shoulders.

“Saten-san!!”

“Wh-what?”

“You said that official told you the missing people went beyond those double doors, right!?”

“Wait…” Saten seemed to have realized what Uiharu was worried about. “Are you saying those people are still there? But wouldn’t the officials have led them to one of the Salmon Reds…?”

“There is no guarantee that they would.”

“B-but can’t you check on the computer!?”

“The information seems to be treated as classified, so I can’t access it through the network. And I doubt they would give us a straight answer if we contacted them.” Uiharu stared Saten straight in the eye while still holding her shoulders. “Saten-san. You don’t have to be too detailed, but tell me where you got in the facility and where you went once you were inside. Also, please draw me a map that shows the inside.”

Saten did not think she could.

If she followed Uiharu’s instructions, Uiharu would head back into Liberal Arts City. The situation was dangerous enough as it was, so there was no guarantee that she would come back safely.

But…

“Saten-san!!”

She heard Uiharu loudly call her name.

She looked into her friend’s eyes, hesitated, looked back into those eyes, and then made up her mind.

“…I’ll go with you.”

“Eh?”

“C’mon!! Let’s just go check and come back!! Xochitl and the others haven’t made it to the city yet, so let’s get this over with while we have a chance!!”

“Saten-san…”

Uiharu fell silent, but then nodded. She and Saten ran from the lifeboat dock.

They left that temporary area of safety and started their own fight.

Mikoto and Shirai moved across the ocean’s surface at high speed using the slight footholds of the buoys.

They were after the Xiuhcoatls above their heads.

They had taken out one which left three more.

Those huge crafts were over 100 meters long and they seemed incredibly oppressive up close. At the same time, their rounded bodies gave a sense of revulsion like they were the bellies of giant insects.

However, the Xiuhcoatls were not undefeatable enemies to Mikoto. Shirai teleported them directly underneath one of them and Mikoto fired an arcade coin straight up at three times the speed of sound. In an attempt to crush the two girls, the Xiuhcoatl scattered a great mass of flames around, but the Railgun blew away the fuel oil-like burning liquid and continued on into the bottom of the Xiuhcoatl.

Mikoto fired a second and a third shot which destroyed the second Xiuhcoatl’s body. The wooden exterior was smashed to pieces and the Xiuhcoatl came apart in midair.

They heard a whooshing sound.

One side of the destroyed Xiuhcoatl’s exterior was spinning around while still emitting that mass of flames. The wreckage scattered the flames in all directions covering the third Xiuhcoatl flying nearby in flames.

“This is our chance!!”

Mikoto’s eyes shined bright as she looked over at the third Xiuhcoatl that’s movement had been dulled. In order to finish it off, she instructed Shirai to take them up into the air. They would land directly on top of the craft and give it a nice gift of a close quarters Railgun blast.

However, Shirai’s landing failed.

There was nothing below her feet.

Mikoto and Shirai had essentially been tossed up 50 meters into the air.

It had not happened because Shirai Kuroko had messed up her teleportation calculations.

With a great noise, the Xiuhcoatl’s shape had greatly changed. It had opened up from the inside like an umbrella.

It had been ignoring aerodynamics before, but the air resistance from opening up a giant parasol-shaped object had been enough to make its speed drop suddenly. Mikoto and Shirai corrected their position and landed on top of the giant flower-like object.

“What…?”

It was a circle with a diameter of about 200 meters.

In the center, something like a long, narrow pillar rose up.

It almost looked like an umbrella opened upside down with its handle pointing up into the air.

But…

(No, this is…!!)

Mikoto looked up into the blue sky while imagining what was on the other side.

“A parabolic antenna!?”

At a location 35,000 kilometers up, a giant object floated in a pitch black area with no oxygen or gravity.

Given the normal techniques of making a rocket or space shuttle, it was hard to imagine making one out of wood, cloth, and obsidian, but that was what this object was made of. In modern terms, it could be referred to as a satellite…no, a space station. The round pieces of obsidian arranged across it flashed at irregular intervals possibly for transmission purposes.

Ancient hieroglyphs were carved into the side of the main body.

They meant Xiuhcoatl, the sun serpent.

It was the fifth Xiuhcoatl craft and it was the main craft.

That symbol of a civilization had been forcibly launched ignoring the laws of physics by a people who had a high level of astronomical knowledge and skills during a time when certain legends still ruled their world.

In those legends, it was believed that it was possible for the sun to be destroyed. This was not the modern idea of the star slowly approaching its death over hundreds of thousands of years. They believed that the sun could be destroyed right that very instant, so the people had decided that they needed to do something themselves to protect that radiance. That was why they had used various methods in an attempt to interfere with the sun.

They had done many things. They had carried out all sorts of ceremonies in order to give power to the sun. One of those projects was launching Xiuhcoatl into space.

Xiuhcoatl was the name of a god they believed had the duty of carrying the sun from the ground into the sky.

The duty of the satellite they had given that name to had been to launch a large amount of flint into the weakening sun in order to restore its vitality. In modern terms, the concept was similar to putting another fuel rod into a nuclear reactor.

In the end, the project had failed.

However, Xiuhcoatl still had a use despite losing its original role.

In other words, it could provide a large scale bombing from orbit.

Xiuhcoatl was also the name of the weapon that had defeated 400 gods.

There was a flickering in the blue sky.

It was not just in one spot.

Bright sunlight poured down like it was midsummer, but the sky flickered like a sky full of stars. Before Mikoto could figure out what it was, the downpour of destruction hit the surface.

“!?”

Everything was swallowed up by the noise.

The one-sided roar stole all other information from Mikoto’s ears. The objects raining down were over 1000 brilliantly white beams of light. With the opened parabolic antenna in the center, an area with a diameter of 10 kilometers was utterly blown away.

Mikoto and Shirai were lucky that it had not been one giant bomb. The randomly scattered attack was more like a shotgun blast, so Shirai could carefully teleport around just barely managing to evade.

A huge amount of seawater was evaporated.

The parabolic antenna was blown to pieces by its ally’s attack.

The sea of flames that had been spreading across the ocean’s surface was utterly blown away.

Shirai continued to teleport around while still holding Mikoto and somehow managed to make it through the first wave. However, a second and a third wave were already raining down from above.

One Xiuhcoatl craft that carried out the role of the parabolic antenna remained.

It flew outside the range of the bombing and headed for Liberal Arts City.

“Kuroko, are you okay!?”

“Leave it…to me!!”

Using the slowly falling remnants of the parabolic antenna as a foothold, Shirai teleported around irregularly.

The downpour of light would not last forever.

From what they could see of the sky, the next wave or the one after that would be the last one.

(Can we make it…!?)

Mikoto glared at the final Xiuhcoatl heading for the horizon. It was about 50/50 whether they could catch up to it. It wasn’t fair to Shirai, but Mikoto had no choice but to have the girl continue evading the downpour of light.

Suddenly, Mikoto heard the sound of something cutting through the air.

Mikoto looked over and saw something already a ways up from the ocean approaching at high speed seeming to slip through the gaps of the raining light. It came to a complete stop next to Mikoto and Shirai.

It was a special craft with a 5 meter long main body made of two canoes one on top of the other and two wings on either side.

It was a Mixcoatl.

Its body was completely covered in wood, so it was impossible to see who was piloting it. A certain name immediately came to Mikoto’s mind because it was the only one of their names Saten had mentioned.

“Xochitl!?”

Of course, no response came from the craft.

Something like a missile shot from a hole on the side of the body. With the sound of escaping gas, a long and narrow contrail was drawn behind it.

“!!”

Shirai frantically teleported to evade the missile.

However, she was worried about the raining light, so she tried to use a short accurate movement instead of putting a lot of distance between them. As a result, she succeeded in evading the missile, but the shockwave from the missile exploding hit her.

“Gaaaaaahhhhhhh!?”

Mikoto and Shirai did nothing, but their bodies slid 3 meters horizontally. All the oxygen in their lungs was forced out. The damage was much more than from a body blow.

And…

“Kuro—Kuroko!!” Mikoto yelled.

It seemed Shirai had passed out from the impact. Of course, that meant they could no longer benefit from her teleportation ability. Mikoto and Shirai once again properly obeyed gravity and started falling toward the ocean from a height of a few dozen meters.

Mikoto had no time to think.

Despite how high up they were, she only had a few seconds until they hit.

Mikoto held onto Shirai’s unconscious form and felt a powerful impact on her back. It was not from the water’s surface. It was from the destroyed Xiuhcoatl. They had landed on the giant wing made of wood, cloth, and obsidian that was attached to the destroyed side that was even then sinking into the ocean. It protected them like landing on a trampoline.

Mikoto kept one arm around Shirai’s waist and grabbed the coin holder with her other hand. She paid no heed to her unstable footing and stared up into the sky.

However, it seemed the Mixcoatl had no interest in them. After succeeding in the bare minimum needed to stop them, it headed down and landed on the ocean surface. It then sped off along the ocean in the direction the final Xiuhcoatl had headed.

“Dammit, wait!! Ah!!”

Mikoto’s footing wobbled and she subconsciously fought to keep her balance.

She was around 20 kilometers from Liberal Arts City, so the artificial island was quite far away. If she fell into the ocean there while still holding Shirai’s unconscious form, they would definitely drown.

On top of that, a large amount of seawater had been evaporated by the downpour of light. However, only the very surface area seemed to have been effected. The cold seawater below must have been mixing in because it was not boiling. Even so, she could feel a steamy heat just by holding out her hand. The water temperature had to be at least 70 degrees. It seemed like it was going to take some time before the deeper cold water managed to lower that temperature.

Seeing the plain horizon in all directions did not give her a sense of freedom or a sense of the majesty of nature.

It was the same as being trapped in the middle of a desert.

She was trapped in one point of a vast area, so she felt only impatience and fear.

“Kuroko…”

Mikoto looked at Shirai whose limbs were sprawled out and who was not moving.

She seemed to be breathing properly and she did not seem to be bleeding. Her life did not seem to be in danger, but she did not look like she would come to anytime soon.

“Kuroko…!!”

Mikoto’s legs trembled.

The Xiuhcoatl wreckage she stood upon was slowly, slowly tilting and beginning to sink. It was like a large board slowly sinking into the water. However, if that wreckage completely sank, Mikoto and Shirai would be dumped into water that exceeded 70 degrees.

(What do I do…?)

Mikoto was conflicted over whether she should start shaking Shirai’s shoulders. She looked around the area. Of course, there was nothing there that could act in place of a bridge or a boat. Mikoto could use electricity to cause all sorts of phenomena, but she could not support both their weights and fly through the air.

At that rate, they would sink.

They would sink without having stopped the final Xiuhcoatl heading for Liberal Arts City.

(What do I do…!?)

As Mikoto looked up into the blue sky out of annoyance, she suddenly realized something.

The wreckage of the Xiuhcoatl she had shot down had been smashed when it had hit the ocean surface, but there was something like a cylindrical tank inside. The strange tank was made of cloth pasted to a framework of wood.

(Come to think of it…didn’t the Mixcoatls have a large amount of hydrogen onboard?)

It was used as the propellant for the missiles and probably for controlling the entire ship itself.

Hydrogen.

A rocket engine using hydrogen.

“…”

Mikoto looked around.

The ocean water spread around her…no, the water molecules spread around her was made of oxygen and hydrogen. If she used electrolysis, she could retrieve the oxygen and hydrogen from the water.

She did not hesitate.

Bluish-white sparks flew from her bangs and a lightning spear was fired at the ocean surface.

But…

(It’s no good. I can break them apart, but I can’t turn it into fuel…!!)

Even if she could retrieve the oxygen and hydrogen, there was simply too little of it. To get anywhere, she needed to obtain a whole lot more hydrogen all at once.

The wreckage jerked below her feet.

She only had a few minutes before it completely sank.

(…No.)

Mikoto’s head suddenly shot up.

Something was odd.

As previously stated, she was an esper that could manipulate electricity. As a side effect, she could also control things such as magnetism and the Lorentz force, but she could not interfere with any phenomenon that did not have its basis in electricity.

But for some reason, the range of what Mikoto could control spread by quite a bit. It was like she had stretched invisible sensing tentacles into the air around her. It was a very strange feeling like she could control every single thing stretching even beyond the horizon in every direction.

(This is…?)

Mikoto looked around.

More accurately, she looked at the air around her.

(Water vapor…? I see. Because such a large amount of seawater was evaporated all at once, the water molecules are floating in the air having been turned to particles!!)

And a faint force existed bridging the space between the tiny particles.

It was static electricity.

(The bonds between the tiny particles are being realized using electricity… The laws are a little different, but if I use my equations for gathering iron sand into a sword using magnetism…)

It would not have worked with mere water molecules.

Mikoto could not control water or mist.

However, the “proportions” of the water molecules drifting through the air may have been optimal or the sea wind mixing with the water vapor may have altered the electrical conductivity. Mikoto did not know the details herself, but she could probably manipulate the huge amounts of water molecules floating in the air around her.

(Once the water vapor cools, the water molecules will join together returning them to mere drops of water. And who knows how long the conductivity will remain at this perfect level. This is my only chance. But if I can acquire the output of a rocket even for a short period of time…!!)

It was an odd feeling like thinly, thinly stretching out.

Mikoto did not fight it.

“…!!”

She greatly switched out the direction her power was headed effectively “grabbing” the huge amount of water molecules drifting through the air. By taking her equations for creating the iron sand sword as a base and switching out some of the values and symbols, she newly built up equations to use static electricity to control the water molecules in the air. The water vapor in the 10 kilometer area the downpour of light had hit all compressed toward Misaka Mikoto.

That alone was not her fuel.

That aggregation of the water molecules in the air was nothing more than a catalyst connecting the electricity and seawater together.

After putting a large cushion between them, she sent her true order to the seawater spread out around her via the huge amount of water molecules. It was like creating a chain reaction from a single phenomenon.

She had everything she needed.

Mikoto looked up into the sky.

She then focused her power on her forehead and sent out the final instruction.

A tremendous roar rang out.

Bluish-white wings of burner-like light appeared from Mikoto’s back.

Technically, that was inaccurate.

What rose up from near Mikoto’s back were wings that looked like blades made of water. Also, bluish-white eruptions that looked like laser blades were being emitted from the side of the wings.

At the same time as the water wings gave Mikoto lift, they also took on the heat transferred from the burner. They would normally evaporate in a few seconds due to that, but seawater was spread out over the entire area. If she constantly replenished from there, it was no problem.

Carried by the two wings, Mikoto slowly left the ground while holding Shirai in both arms.

The Xiuhcoatl wreckage sank into the ocean as if it had been waiting for that moment. She could no longer go back and land.

“…Whoops.”

Mikoto was managing to float in the sky, but her balance must have been off because she started floating to the right. She immediately modified the equations she was using, added on four smaller wings, regulated her balance in the air and the output of the burners, and managed to come to a complete stop in midair.

“Okay, that’s enough for the warm up exercises…”

Mikoto intensely stared forward and the burners erupted all at once.

A bluish-white beam of light shot out behind her.

“Wait for me! I’ll show you that this hasn’t truly started yet!!”

She seemed to be dragging along a tail of light as she headed straight for Liberal Arts City. Now that she had started to control the seawater via the water molecules floating in the air, there was nothing to be afraid of.

In order to replenish the fuel for the water wings and the burners, something like a giant human arm shot up from the distant ocean surface. With that “arm” still connected to her back, Academy City’s #3 Level 5 soared through the sky.

Misaka Mikoto flew through the sky at a speed fast enough that it was difficult to breathe in any air.

She had a single goal.

She had to shoot down the Xiuhcoatl heading for Liberal Arts City and protect the tourists and workers there.

Chapter 8

The fourth and final Xiuhcoatl entered Liberal Arts City.

The attack range from orbit had a diameter of around 10 kilometers, so the antenna had to be deployed at the very center of the city in order to blow away the entire manmade island.

From within her Mixcoatl flying across the ocean, Xochitl watched the Xiuhcoatl fly off. She would soon head slowly away from Liberal Arts City. She had no intention of getting caught in the blast.

(I guess our objective is as good as complete.)

That facility had caused many tragedies by investigating and researching the techniques of Return of the Winged One. Xochitl had no strong feelings about it meeting its fate. She was not thinking about the success for her organization.

She was wondering what would become of all the tourists.

She thought for a bit, but then shook her head.

(I didn’t tell her everything, but I gave her the necessary hints.)

There was nothing more she could do.

She sighed once and then turned the Mixcoatl around so she could escape the attack range of their ultimate weapon.

Suddenly, Xochitl heard a tremendous roar. She looked over and saw a girl with six glowing wings charging from the ocean into Liberal Arts City as if she were chasing after the Xiuhcoatl.

The girl landed on the roof of a nearby building and seemed to lay down the girl she had been holding in her arms. Afterwards, she spread her six wings once more and charged after the Xiuhcoatl.

“Her…!?”

It was the girl Xochitl had thought she had stopped back over the ocean.

Xochitl did not know what the laws behind her power were, but the girl was a monster that had shot down three Xiuhcoatls with no real weapon. Xochitl gritted her teeth, hesitated, and then headed back into Liberal Arts City. There was a danger of getting caught up in her ally’s bombing, but she could not allow the final Xiuhcoatl to be shot down after coming that far.

The girl with the six wings seemed to have noticed Xochitl who was approaching at high speed along the waterways running through the city. As she chased after the Xiuhcoatl, the girl glanced over at Xochitl. She smiled while looking at her new enemy.

The girl seemed to have said something, but Xochitl couldn’t hear what it was.

However, she *was* able to see what was in the girl’s hand.

Something was placed atop the girl’s right thumb.

It was an arcade coin.

There were no longer any guards.

With the chaos continuing within Liberal Arts City, there was almost no security left at the entrance to the restricted area. Uiharu Kazari and Saten Ruiko left the unlocked door open as they returned to the sunny ocean city.

A crowd of people seemed to be following them.

They were the people who had been imprisoned within Liberal Arts City’s restricted area. The group of 20 or 30 people included men, women, adults, and children. They wanted to hurry, but their weary bodies did not allow them to run at full speed. According to Saten, they were the “criminals” that had caused some sort of trouble in the city, but…

Uiharu looked up at the blue sky.

“We should be fine now… We just need to head for one of the lifeboat docks. There will probably be officials there, but that’s the only way to escape!!”

A battle between multiple fighters and flying fish was continuing on the horizon visible from the beach. It was unclear when that battle would reach the island and it was possible a stray bullet or missile could suddenly come flying their way.

At any rate, they had to hurry.

The people had been in an area with contamination warning labels pasted all over the place, but they did not seem to be having any issues. It seemed Liberal Arts City was just planning for the worst possible situation because they did not understand what it was they were researching. Saten said that Olive had mentioned the contamination being an erroneous decision by management.

(The docks haven’t been taken out yet, have they? No, we need to hurry to a lifeboat!! With ships that big, they should easily be able to hold 20 or 30 extra people!!)

Saten was guiding the group of people by gesturing, but she suddenly froze. Uiharu looked over and noticed that a battle was occurring within the city, too.

The scenery was a mess. Buildings had collapsed and tilted and crushed rollercoaster tracks were blocking the path. A large Ferris wheel collapsed and crushed a few buildings as if it had been pushed by a giant.

Some people were fighting amongst that.

One of them seemed to be Misaka Mikoto. Uiharu did not know how, but she was flying around using six glowing wings. The other was one of the flying fish. One seemed to be trying to destroy a 100 meter aircraft and the other seemed to be trying to defend it.

“Xochitl…?” Saten muttered upon seeing that flying fish.

“Eh?”

“No, don’t fight that person, Xochitl!!”

The next thing Uiharu knew, Saten was already running.

The girl was wearing only a swimsuit, but she was running toward that battlefield in which small missiles and Railgun blasts were flying back and forth. She was charging into a site of intense fighting where stray shots were destroying empty buildings or blowing away roads.

“Saten-san!!” Uiharu yelled, but Saten only turned back once.

Uiharu thought she saw Saten mouth the words “I have to go”, but she was unable to hear the other girl’s words. Saten then once more started running toward the front line of the fight between Mikoto and the flying fish.

The fight between Mikoto and Xochitl continued.

However, Mikoto had a definite advantage given the situation. After all, Mixcoatls were meant to be used on the ocean. They could fly by temporarily increasing the output of their hovering, but that was not what they were made to do. They were not suited for defending a flying ship from an enemy that could fly freely through the sky.

(No…)

Xochitl denied her own idea as her Mixcoatl jumped from one waterway to another running along parallel to it.

(It isn’t just this specific situation. She’s just too strong!!)

Even if she was flying through the sky using some kind of special power, that enemy was still a flesh and blood human.

Even so, she was fighting more than evenly with Xochitl who was piloting a weapon. She was firing something like lightning from her bangs, swinging around a giant sword made of iron sand from the beach, and even firing a tiny coin at three times the speed of sound.

She had plenty of different types of attacks and each one of them was quite strong. Also, she did not simply focus on attack. Merely getting out from in front of the girl was not enough. There had been plenty of opportunities for Xochitl to circle around behind her, but each time, the iron sand sword had bent like a whip and prevented Xochitl from hitting her with even a single attack.

As Xochitl moved from waterway to waterway, she used the hover function at full capacity to jump up a few dozen meters into the air.

At the same time, she fired multiple missiles.

Mikoto did not evade.

She charged straight toward Xochitl with much sharper angles and with a much more direct path than the missiles. The wings erupting from her back blew up the missiles that just barely passed by her without hitting.

Bluish-white sparks flew from the approaching girl’s bangs.

It was the omen of an incoming lightning-like strike.

Xochitl immediately fired new missiles, but her opponent was clearly faster.

However, she heard a dull clunk.

It had not yet reached the center of Liberal Arts City, but the final Xiuhcoatl was opening its umbrella wide. It was the giant parabolic antenna that had been made from the very best of Aztec astronomy. It seemed the ones operating it remotely had decided that it was better to get in a strike even if it would not take out the entire city than to have it shot down.

They intended to blow away half of Liberal Arts City along with Xochitl who was trying to protect the Xiuhcoatl.

(That’s none of my concern…!!)

Xochitl gritted her teeth and tried to focus on the enemy before her eyes.

However, that enemy did not.

Despite having been given an opportunity to shoot Xochitl down from the front, the girl’s focus had been turned solely to the Xiuhcoatl. Immediately afterwards, Xochitl’s Mixcoatl charged in toward Mikoto. The girl used her wings to try to evade to the side, but the tip of one of the Mixcoatl’s wings grazed her, throwing it into a tailspin. Something must have happened to the girl too because about half of her six wings disappeared and she started to fall as her speed fell.

(So this…)

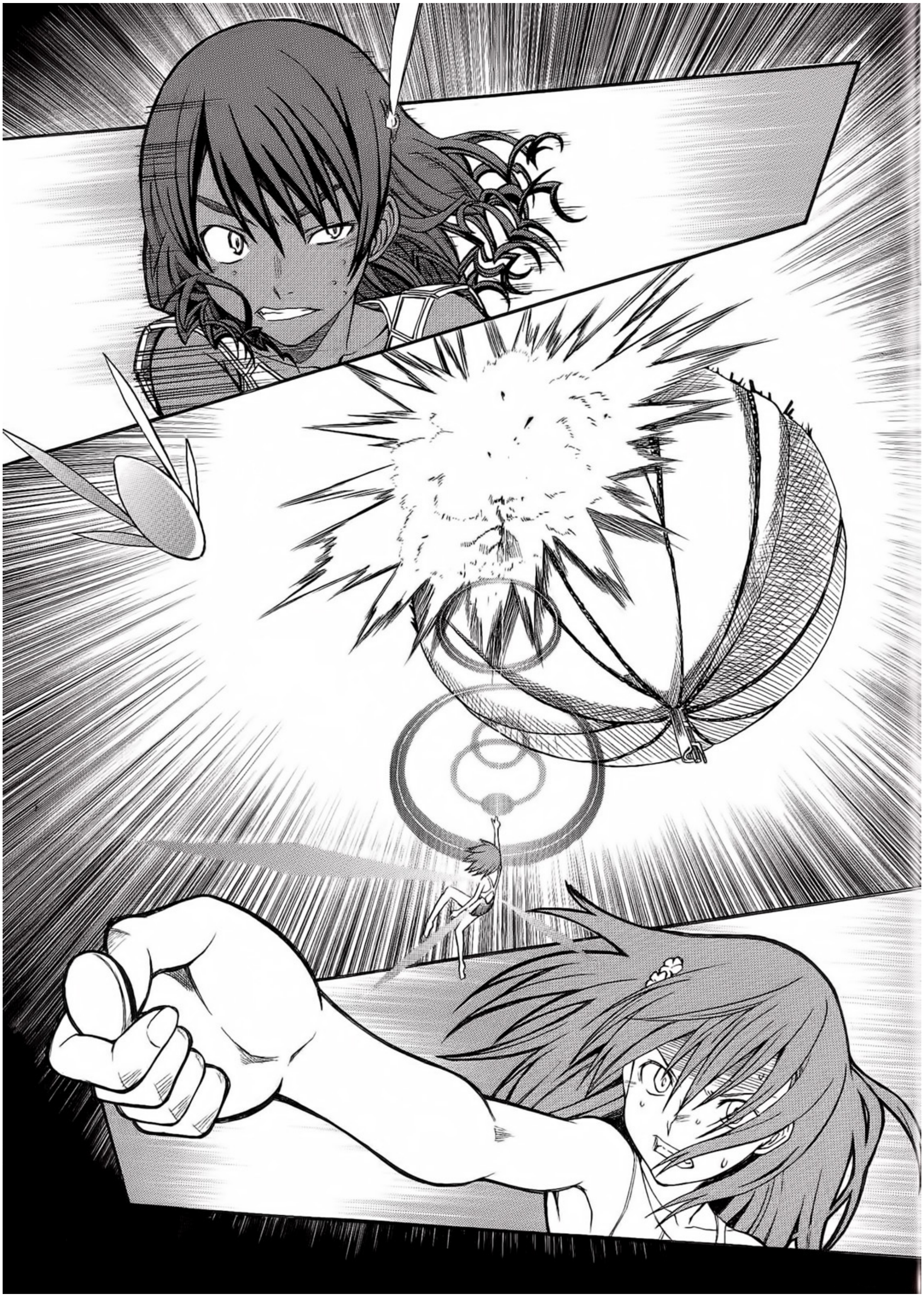
Xochitl thought as she glanced over at the completely opened parabolic antenna.

Even if she tried to escape at full speed, it was too late.

(So this is the end.)

Xochitl gave up even on piloting her ship and closed both of her eyes.

She imagined the attack raining down from orbit, but…



“Oh, hell no!!”

Xochitl heard the girl’s voice.

She had thought the girl had been knocked from the sky, but when she opened her eyes in surprise, she saw her sticking her right hand out toward the Xiuhcoatl while still unable to properly control her position. She was more or less falling, but her aim was perfect.

A single coin lay on top of her thumb.

In flicking that coin lay the conviction of the one who did not give up to the end.

Xochitl grabbed the helm again to try to intercept the girl, but she did not make it. The gap between the one who had given up and the one who had not given up opened up greatly as the girl fired her final attack from her hand.

An explosive noise ripped through the air.

The coin was fired at three times the speed of sound and it became an orange line in an instant.

That attack directly hit the outer edge of the opened parabolic antenna. The destructive power concentrated on that one point spread to the entire craft all at once. Like a crease spreading along a piece of paper, a large crack spread across the circular parabolic antenna blowing away about a third of the whole.

The shock from that direct hit greatly changed the direction the antenna was facing.

Even so, it was not utterly blown to pieces.

The basic outline of the Xiuhcoatl remained floating in the air.

(What’s going to happen…?)

Xochitl quickly changed directions and worked to keep Mikoto in her sights while half of her focus was on the Xiuhcoatl.

(What’s going to happen…!?)

Did she want it to succeed and blow away Liberal Arts City as well as herself?

Or did she want it to fail and allow her to survive?

Xochitl was not sure which outcome she was wishing for as she watched to see which would actually occur.

And then a few seconds passed without anything happening.

That elapsed time sent a powerful tension through Xochitl's body.

But nothing happened.

The Xiuhcoatl's giant parabolic antenna started to fall as it was swept away by the impact of the damage done to it. The antenna may have acted as a parachute to a certain extent because its speed was surprisingly slow as it headed for the ground.

That may have been why Xochitl was able to notice it.

Xochitl saw Saten Ruiko standing utterly still at the spot the remains of the parabolic antenna were likely to land.

"…!!"

A strange feeling rose up from the depths of Xochitl's stomach. It was an odd torrent that seemed to be a mix of different feelings like tension and anger. Xochitl did not know why the girl had come there, but she was standing there in a swimsuit like an idiot.

She was looking up, but not at the large construction falling toward her head.

She was looking up at Xochitl's Mixcoatl.

Xochitl bit her own tongue.

(Damn her…!!)

She clenched the helm as if she were trying to crush it and immediately dropped down. She checked on how many missiles she had left. There was simply no way she could move Saten out of the way using that craft. If she was going to save the girl, she had no choice but to blow away the falling wreckage.

Even if the Xiuhcoatl was half-destroyed, it was still a symbol of their power.

Also, she had no way of knowing if it had lost all of its functionality…

“Right now…”

Xochitl moved her lips.

Her trembling hands touched a button on the helm.

“Right now, it’s nothing but junk…!!”

As she yelled, she fired multiple missiles.

The missiles flew in arcs through the air and struck the large wreckage of the Xiuhcoatl. Multiple explosions occurred one after another. The giant wooden construction cracked, burst, broke, and was otherwise smashed to pieces. But it was not enough. Just destroying one portion of the wreckage left the large mass dozens of meters across still falling for Saten’s head.

And then, the girl that had been her enemy and who had lost most of her wings fired a coin at three times the speed of sound. With a tremendous roar, the side of the wreckage was greatly blown away. The craft had been split in two, but it had not been utterly smashed. However, the trajectory of the large mass had been skewed diagonally a bit. It was now heading on a line where it was hard to tell if it would hit Saten or not.

If it hit her, it would all be over.

Even if it did not hit her, the wood fragments that would be scattered around once it hit the ground might hit her.

“!!”

Xochitl did not hesitate.

She lowered the Mixcoatl’s altitude even further. She headed down as if she were charging straight into the ground and then suddenly raised the Mixcoatl’s nose right in front of Saten Ruiko. She just barely got the belly of the craft to hover.

And then the Xiuhcoatl wreckage fell mercilessly down.

A great amount of sand was forced up into the air. Wooden fragments that were as sharp as a ferocious beast’s fangs scattered in every direction. However, Saten Ruiko did not receive a scratch.

The Mixcoatl stood between her and the Xiuhcoatl wreckage like a shield.

The rain of wooden fragments was like a rain of spears.

The wood was the kind that would be used in a house’s pillars and countless pieces stabbed into the side of the Mixcoatl.

Seeing that, Saten let out a scream.

“X-Xo-Xochitl!! Waaah, Xochitl!?”

The Mixcoatl remained motionless before the panicked girl.

Saten was unable to run over and she merely sank down to the ground. Just when tears were about to come flowing down from her eyes, the double canoe-like body shook slightly. It opened up as if the top half were sliding back.

“Dammit…” spat out the seemingly uninjured girl inside.

Even so, there were deep wrinkles on Xochitl’s face.

“I really am an idiot.”

“Xochitl?”

Saten approached on wobbling legs and Xochitl pulled out her knife.

The strange blade was made of a mineral known as obsidian. While holding it out toward Saten to keep her from getting closer, Xochitl yelled out from the bottom of her gut.

“It may have been greatly damaged, but the bare minimum of functionality may have been recoverable!! It was worth at least trying to get the Xiuhcoatl running again!! Why did I do that to save someone like her!?”

At first, her words had seemed like she was just yelling at herself.

But then Saten realized something.

She had been speaking in Japanese. When Xochitl had spoken with her comrade, she had spoken in some foreign language, but she had used Japanese, a language she was not accustomed to, when she had spoken just then.

That meant…

“Oh, c’mon. You know why.”

Xochitl frantically turned in the direction of that voice.

Misaka Mikoto had landed at some point and was now looking Xochitl in the eye. She was not unscathed after having a few of her wings disappear causing her to stall in midair. Xochitl hesitated upon seeing the eyes of that girl with injuries in various places across her body.

“I…”

“You had realized that this way of doing things was not right, hadn’t you?” Mikoto said cutting off Xochitl’s words. “That was why you told Saten-san about the lifeboats. No, it wasn’t just then. That was also why you saved her from the official that was trying to kill her. You risked your life for that even though it had nothing to do with your organization’s mission.”

“…”

“We know that the people of Liberal Arts City are rotten. Your comrades must have had fairly horrible things done to them. But we do not think your organization is absolutely in the right either for trying to purge everyone here. If you insist upon selfishly continuing to fight and killing all of the normal people trapped here, then I must fight you.”

With a hiss, the remaining wings on Mikoto’s back disappeared.

She was not unscathed.

Even so, Mikoto refused to fall back.

“I thought I could get through to you since you saved Saten-san. I thought you would agree that there is a way to solve this other than violence. …What will you do? Are you going to continue this ridiculous fight in front of the girl you saved?”

“Xochitl…” Saten slowly called out the brown girl’s name.

Xochitl did not respond.

She continued to hang her head down as she gripped the Mixcoatl’s helm and trembled. That directly displayed the state of Xochitl’s heart. She had to fight, but she did not want to. Finally, she yelled out a curse in a strange language and pounded the helm with her fists like she were breaking her own core.

Xochitl limply sank down into the Mixcoatl with its open top. She frowned up at the sunlight pouring down from above.

Saten Ruiko and Misaka Mikoto were talking about something nearby, but Xochitl was not listening. She merely thought about what had occurred there.

Liberal Arts City was likely done for.

The attacks over consecutive days had destroyed quite a few buildings. The ground had been torn up by many explosions and some areas were flooded with seawater from broken waterways.

The foundation of the manmade island had not been destroyed, but they would not be able to carry on as before after such a great disturbance. It was possible a few restricted areas were still functioning, but Xochitl alone could easily sneak in and destroy them given the current chaos. If she did, the fruits of their research would be utterly destroyed.

Wouldn’t that be fine?

That way, it would not be necessary to utterly destroy the manmade island getting all those normal people wrapped up in the process?

“…”

Xochitl gave a slight sigh.

She then heard some slight static.

She was receiving a message from a man from Return of the Winged One through the communications spiritual item installed in her Mixcoatl. The male voice coming through belonged to a superior of hers.

“Can you hear me, Xochitl? The mission priorities have changed.”

“…?”

“They have hidden a few lifeboats around the city. They are quite large. They may be planning to use them to transport the samples they have cultivated.”

A chill ran across Xochitl’s entire body.

She had an idea what her comrades were planning to do.

“Where are you? We are going to open a small hole from 3.5 to 3.7. If we get through there, we can destroy Liberal Arts City’s eastern defensive line like a chain reaction. Once we shake off their fighters, we will head straight for the lifeboat docks. If you can move, then join in.”

“Wait…”

Xochitl subconsciously leaned in toward the communications spiritual item. Saten and Mikoto looked toward her, but they seemed not to grasp the situation. It was probably due to the language she was using.

“The people aboard the lifeboats are the tourists and the workers who had nothing to do with the secret side of the city. Those lifeboats do not have the equipment needed to hold the samples!!”

“How can you know that for sure? Have you checked?”

"Well…"

"What you know is probably just from the blueprints. How can we trust something like that? How can you say for sure that the people who built such a ridiculous facility are not hiding anything aboard those lifeboats? Why do you think we destroyed the undersea linear motor train tunnel and the heliports first? …We will destroy what we must when we must."

"But all the normal people in the city are gathering on them! Don't you understand? Those boats are overflowing with people who know nothing of us and would have no idea how a Mixcoatl worked even if you showed it to them! You can't just…!!"

"I do not care," the man said cutting her off. "We are not fighting for something as trivial as that."

The transmission immediately cut off to indicate his disappointment in her.

He was saying not to complain if she was not going to help.

He was saying to just let them do as they pleased.

That pride had been obvious from his tone of voice. It was the stereotypical way of speaking for someone who refused to listen. Xochitl wanted to stop it, but he held a higher position than her in Return of the Winged One. That mission was an official mission. If she forcibly stopped it, she would be the one that would get punished.

"Dammit!!" Xochitl spat out.

Saten looked worriedly over and asked what had happened.

Xochitl was reluctant to answer.

However, saying nothing would not resolve the situation.

Xochitl spoke in Japanese.

"The people from my organization will have breached the city defenses before long. They have decided that the city's research data is being stored aboard the lifeboats about to leave, so they intend to sink them.”

“Wai—”

“You’re kidding!!”

Mikoto and Saten were both utterly shocked.

When Xochitl explained the details, it turned out that the Salmon Red lifeboat that would be targeted first due to their location and the location of the Mixcoatls would be the one Uiharu was aboard.

Mikoto grabbed Xochitl’s shoulders and yelled a question at her.

“They’re part of your organization, right!? Can’t you stop them!?”

“We may be part of the same organization, but they’re my superiors! If I could say anything that would stop them, I would have already done so!!” Xochitl must have been extremely irritated because she shook off Mikoto’s hands and yelled back at her. “They don’t really care whether the research data is really there or not. As long as they kill them, they’ll be satisfied. There’s no way to persuade them!!”

Saten frantically thought with her amateur mind.

“Wh-wh-what do we do!? …I know! Let’s tell the officials what’s going on and see if they can send a few fighters over to—”

“If they had the forces to spare, they would have already sent them out! Liberal Arts City is doing everything it can to hold the defensive line to the east. And even so, they said they were going to open a hole!!”

“M-Misaka-san…!?”

Saten looked over to Mikoto with a look in her eyes like she was relying on her, but Mikoto shook her head.

“I can’t. In order to make those wings, I used the water molecules floating in the air, but that has reached its limit. It was crucial that they were distributed with a certain proportion, but the molecules have gathered together with time making them nothing more than drops of water. Simply put, I can't fly. And since Kuroko is down, we can't use her teleportation either."

"No…"

"But that doesn't mean I can't use my power at all. I can at least wait for them on the beach, but…"

"Mixcoatl's on the ocean can have a maximum speed that reaches Mach 2. Many of them will be charging in and if you miss even one, it will head straight for the lifeboats." Xochitl ground her teeth as she spoke. "Of course, I still want your help. You have enough power to shoot down a Xiuhcoatl, so I know you'll be helpful, but you aren't enough. In addition to you waiting on the beach, the number of Mixcoatls needs to be lowered by someone over the ocean."

"But…" Saten started to say. "We don't have anyone who can do that. We don't have a fighter and Shirai-san can't help us. Uiharu and I don't have any kind of amazing power like that either. Who is going to fight them on the ocea—?"

Saten trailed off.

She had noticed Xochitl climbing back into her half destroyed Mixcoatl.

"That's who."

"Wait!!" Saten yelled at Xochitl. "You and they are both in the same kind of flying fish, right!? You aren't piloting some especially amazing one, right!? Then they'll be completely outnumbered!!"

In fact, Xochitl's Mixcoatl had been stabbed by quite a few thick wooden shards when protecting Saten. Saten had a terrible vision of what would happen if Xochitl took on multiple fully equipped Mixcoatls in that state, but she frantically pushed it away.

Mikoto looked over at Xochitl and asked a question.

"Couldn't I ride in your Mixcoatl, too?"

"No," was Xochitl's immediate response. "I am not some close partner of yours. Some cooperative strategy requiring great coordination like that will not succeed between two people who quickly formed a team. We would both just trip up the other bringing it all crashing down. I'd rather fight on my own."

That was likely not what she truly thought.

In reality, Xochitl did not want to get Mikoto any more wrapped up in her fight than she already was. She had not said that, but it was clear by looking at her.

Mikoto sighed slightly.

Getting into a fight over that would not help anything. Either way, Xochitl would be the only one operating the Mixcoatl. She doubted Xochitl would agree to it if she tried to force her.

"If it gets truly bad out there, head back within 50 meters of the shore. I can help you out with my Railgun."

"Misaka-san!! Xochitl, too!?"

Saten frantically started to get mad at Mikoto. She must have thought Xochitl was truly going to leave at that rate.

Xochitl fell silent for a short time and then spoke to Mikoto while staring at the Mixcoatl's helm.

"Can I ask you to do something?"

"What?"

"Please knock that idiot out with your electricity."

"Xoch—!?"

Saten started to say something, but Mikoto lightly placed her hand on the girl's shoulder.

It was a completely casual action like tapping on someone's shoulder to get them to turn around.

However, immediately afterwards, the sound of sparks rang out. Mikoto had sent out a carefully regulated high voltage current that would leave no lasting effects on the human body. Having received that current, Saten collapsed to the ground.

Mikoto and Xochitl looked sadly down at Saten’s face.

It was probably just a coincidence, but Saten’s arms were stretched out in front of her like she was trying to grab something.

Xochitl took her eyes off of Saten like she was turning around and then spoke.

“Let’s go.”

“…Are you really okay with doing this?”

“Do you need to be knocked out, too?”

“…I’m not just talking about the difference in firepower. You’re about to fight your own comrades.”

“Don’t make me say the same thing twice.”

Hearing Xochitl’s short but resolute comment, Mikoto sighed.

She had actually been thinking of knocking Xochitl unconscious, but she couldn’t stand up to that. Xochitl operated the upper cover of the Mixcoatl sealing up the battered craft before heading over to a nearby waterway.

“I’ll go on ahead. I can’t guarantee that I’ll intercept all of them. I have no real reason to trust you, but I will admit that you showed skill in shooting down our ultimate weapon.”

Mikoto did not even have time to complain.

With a roar, the Mixcoatl shot along the waterway at tremendous speed. Xochitl’s craft disappeared from view in no time at all as it headed from the waterway and onto the ocean.

“…”

Mikoto turned back just once toward Saten’s collapsed form.

However, Mikoto could not stay where she was.

To set up her own defensive line and to create a roof with which to protect Xochitl in the very end, Mikoto ran toward the shore.

Xochitl headed east from the beach at high speed in her battered Mixcoatl. She knew she was about to clash with her former comrades of Return of the Winged One, but her heart was not in conflict.

She had not decided Return of the Winged One was her enemy.

Her intention to stay with Return of the Winged One until she died had not changed.

However, that was the very reason she opposed them there.

Because she intended to stay with them to her death, she was taking her own selfish act there.

If she ended up being punished according to the rules of the organization as a result, she was fine with that.

If Return of the Winged One was going to ignore their own rules and give in to their anger to simply go on an irrational rampage, she needed to disappoint them.

(I’ve gotten rather arrogant to think I alone can bring the organization back on track…)

Just as Xochitl gave a small smile, she realized a single Mixcoatl was approaching her. Tension ran through her, but then she realized it was not an enemy. It was her comrade, Tochtli.

“What are you here for?”

“I’m sneaking in ahead through the hole in the enemy’s defensive line as ordered by our intolerable superiors. But I don’t like it any more than you do.”

Tochtli’s Mixcoatl passed by Xochitl’s before making a U-turn to match Xochitl’s direction. She then lined up parallel to Xochitl.

“Aren’t you pointed the wrong way?”

“No, this is the path I’m taking.”

A slight laugh could be heard via Tochtli’s communications spiritual item.

To say that, she must have made up her mind, too.

“Since I have the misfortune of being your friend, I’ll stick with you on this one.”

“Really, it seems you can find idiots everywhere.”

Two explosive noises split across the ocean.

The Mixcoatls with all those bastards on them could be glimpsed on the horizon.

Xochitl released the safety on the missiles as the others seemed surprised at her and Tochtli’s sudden action.

“…I see. Then I have no reason to hold back!!”

“Of course not. I’m going all out, too!!”

The final battle began.

Multiple Mixcoatls crossed paths and explosions continued to ring out.

When Saten awoke from her short unconsciousness, she could only look out to sea, but Misaka Mikoto did not have to fight a Mixcoatl even once as she stood waiting on the beach. Xochitl had said she could not guarantee that she could intercept them all, but in the end, she had not allowed a single one through.

After the battle, Xochitl had headed beyond the horizon along with the companion she had been fighting alongside.

The administration of Liberal Arts City had collapsed.

Apparently, the official announcement said that the city had been attacked by special guerillas that mainly fought using cheap old-style fighters. The general public was told that the guerilla base had been assaulted by special forces, but Saten felt that was likely a lie. She felt even the part about there being a guerilla base was a lie.

Of course, that story did not match with all the information from the witnesses, but that seemed to have been explained away as being a type of mass hysteria similar to UFO sightings.

While they left on one of the Salmon Red lifeboats, the film director named Beverly seemed to be thinking about a lot of things, but in the end she said she had decided to go with a romance movie. Apparently, she was going to leave Hollywood and go work in Europe.

The large scale field trip had been forced to end earlier than scheduled, so Saten and the others were aboard the plane home. The blue Pacific Ocean could be seen out the window. Saten could see a single spot on the ocean that almost looked like a stain. Was that the manmade island of Liberal Arts City that was being demolished with the help of Academy City?

According to Mikoto, Academy City had funded the demolition of Liberal Arts City so that they could ensure that the fruits of the city’s research were disposed of.

However, Saten did not particularly care about that. Normally, she should have been overjoyed that the thing forcing Xochitl and her comrades into that needless battle was being destroyed. However, Saten had no interest in the fighting itself. She could not innocently rejoice while she did not know where Xochitl had gone. What was she doing now that she had bared her fangs toward her own organization?

“Xochitl…” Saten muttered while staring out the window.

Why had she asked Mikoto to knock her out at the very end like that? Had she decided that it was not even worth listening to the words of an amateur who would be no help in a battle? Did Xochitl really feel that her words held so little value?

When she asked Mikoto about it, it was probably mostly just an outburst of anger. The girl sitting next to her was the one who had actually knocked her out after all.

“No.”

But Mikoto just shook her head upon hearing what Saten had asked.

“That girl did listen to what you said, Saten-san.”

“But she didn’t even let me finish speaking. She asked you to forcibly stop me from speaking, Misaka-san.”

“It isn’t that simple. Xochitl could not allow herself to listen to any more of what you said. Your words were making her conflicted about whether she should actually go fight or not. She was actually really happy about what you said.”

“…”

After hearing that, Saten remained silent for a bit.

Mikoto had not actually been told that by Xochitl and it was possible it was just a lie to make Saten feel better, but Saten felt it was the truth. Most likely, Mikoto felt a different kind of bond with Xochitl from what Saten felt. That was why Mikoto knew things Saten did not and did not know the things that only Saten knew.

“By the way, what were you going to say if I hadn’t knocked you out?”

Saten responded honestly to Mikoto’s question.

As soon as she did, Mikoto started laughing uproariously for some reason.

“Wait, why are you laughing?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry! But Saten-san…I think Xochitl was right. If she had heard you say that, not even I would’ve complained if she stopped right there.”

“…Is it really that weird a thing to say?”

Saten puffed out her cheeks and looked away from Mikoto who continued to laugh.

She looked out the window again and said once more what she had wanted to say back then, but this time only inside her own head.

At an unknown time in an unknown place, two girls walked along a long passageway filled with a moderate amount of light. Their hands were bound in front of them by handcuffs that looked like planks of wood with holes in them.

The two girls said a few things to each other quietly as they walked along next to each other. It seemed to be a light joke because one of the girls' shoulders shook in laughter, but the other girl gave no reaction.

Finally, they stopped.

They had not come out into some especially large area nor had they stopped before a large door. To someone looking on, it would have seemed like they had simply stopped at a point partway down the long, long passageway. However, that point held great meaning to the girls…no, to the organization the girls belonged to.

A voice resounded from somewhere.

It was a strange voice that seemed to reverberate and seemed to have no source.

"Do you mind if we begin?"

Despite having asked, no time was given for the girls to respond.

The walls on the right and left of the passageway moved outward. The area that had seemed a mere passageway turned into a large space. The walls did not move at a uniform rate. The distance they moved back seemed to be regulated in stages and the area opened up like it was a giant stairway.

An endless stone stairway opened up on either side.

It was a bit reminiscent of a university lecture hall.

Finally, a group of figures appeared at the top of the "staircase". Men and women both young and old were dressed in distinctive tribal outfits. Each one of them continued on to their determined spots and slowly sat down.

The two girls stood up straight once more.

One of them muttered something and the other one sighed out of exasperation.

“You two certainly are calm.”

The two girls did not respond to that voice.

The two old friends merely exchanged the following words.

“Now then, I wonder what kind of punishment we’re going to get, Xochitl.”

“Tochtli, I know this is all ridiculous, but at least try to look like you’re taking it seriously.”